

MAURICE DRUON

THE
CURTAIN
FALLS

A MODERN TRILOGY

Translated from the French by
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Prologue

THE walls of the room in the nursing-home, the wood of the furniture even the iron of the bedstead were painted a brilliant, crude, washable white. From the frosted glass shade above the bedhead, the electric light, equally crude and equally white, shone down on the sheets, on the pale-faced patient who blinked continually, on the cradle, and on the six visitors.

"None of your arguments will change my opinion by one iota, not even the fact that there's a war on," said the Marquis de La Monnerie. "I utterly disapprove of this new fashion of lying-in away from home."

He was seventy-four years old and the mother's uncle. Three-quarters bald, he still had a coronet of white hair at the back of his head brushed stiffly upwards like the crest of a macaw.

"Did our mothers make such a fuss?" he went on. "They didn't require fifty damned surgeons and nurses about them, and all these stinking medicaments to produce healthy children. They let nature take its course, and after a couple of days the roses were back in their cheeks. Just look at her, she's like a piece of chewed string!"

Stretching a cuff towards the pillow, he called on the family to witness. But at this moment he was attacked by a fit of coughing; the blood mounted to his face, tinged its crevices, its protuberances, even coloured the skin of his skull scarlet. He spat noisily into his handkerchief and wiped his moustache.

Sitting to the right of the bed, Madame Jean de La Monnerie, wife of the great poet and mother of the patient, shrugged imposing shoulders. Long past fifty, she was dressed in garnet-coloured velvet and wore an enormous hat. Without turning to look at him, she answered her brother-in-law in a tone of authority: "Nevertheless, my dear Urbain, if your wife had been taken to hospital in time, she might be alive today. There was a good deal of talk about it at the time!"

"Not at all, not at all," replied Urbain de La Monnerie. "You were much too young, Juliette; what can you know about it? In hospital, nursing-home or elsewhere, poor Mathilde would have died. And she wouldn't even have had the satisfaction of doing so in her own bed

instead of a public one! The fact is, you can't found a Christian family with a wife whose hips are so narrow they'll go through a napkin-ring."

"Do you think this conversation is suitable in the circumstances?" asked the Baronne Schoudler, a little woman with grey hair and a fresh complexion, who was standing on the other side of the bed.

The patient turned her head slightly and smiled at her.

"It doesn't matter, Mother, it doesn't matter at all," she murmured.

Between the Baronne Schoudler and her daughter-in-law was that peculiar understanding common between short people.

"My dear Jacqueline, you seem to me to be going on very well," continued the Baronne Schoudler. "One must admit that having two children in eighteen months is quite a strain. You've stood up to it very well and your infant is splendid!"

The Marquis de La Monnerie turned grumblingly towards the cradle.

There were three men standing round it, all dressed in subfusc clothes, pearl pins in their ties. The youngest was the Baron Noël Schoudler, a director of the Bank of France, one of the grandfathers of the newborn child and husband of the little woman with the grey hair and the fresh complexion. Noël Schoudler was of enormous size. His stomach, his torso, his cheeks, his eyelids, were all heavily impressive, bearing the stamp of self-assurance and a taste for the warfare of finance. He wore a short, very black beard, trimmed to a point like a pirate's.

This massive sexagenarian showed immense consideration for his father, Siegfried Schoudler, the Patriarch, the founder of the Schoudler Bank, whom Paris had always called "Baron Ziegfried," a tall thin old man, with a blotched skull and yellow whiskers, an enormous veined nose, and eyes encircled with a sort of liquid purple, who sat with his knees apart and his back bent, constantly whispering into his son's ear confidences that everyone could overhear in what remained of an Austrian accent.

The last person around the cradle was the other grandfather, Jean de La Monnerie, the famous poet and Academician. Two years younger than his brother Urbain, whose thinner and more liverish counterpart he was, he stood leaning on an ebony cane, his baldness concealed by a long lock of yellow hair combed across his forehead.

He had taken no part in the family argument. He was contemplating the infant, a warm, blind, crumpled little grub, whose face, barely half the size of an adult fist, showed above its swaddling clothes.

"A mystery," he said, "a perfectly banal mystery, and yet for all of us the most impenetrable and the most important."

He shook his head sadly, letting his tinted eyeglass, attached to a

cord, fall from his eye. His left eye, thereby uncovered, had a slight cast in it.

"Once upon a time," he went on, "I could not bear the sight of a new-born child. It upset me. The embryonic blindness, the mental void, the tiny limbs whose bones, one knows, are still but jelly, the mysterious knowledge of the cells that will one day cease to grow. Why do we waste away?"

The words seemed to tumble out of him.

"Why do we become what we are?" he added with a sigh. "One comes to the end of one's life and one has still understood no more than this child."

"There is no mystery, only God, that's all," said Urbain de La Monnerie. "And when one becomes old as we are, well, one becomes like an old stag that's going back, carrying less horn each year."

Noël Schoudler thrust out an enormous forefinger, holding it to the infant's hand.

Then, from above their tall, stiff, starched collars, bending their heads down, lowering their puffy features, their wrinkles, their pale or purple eyelids, their blotched foreheads, their wide, rheumy nostrils, their huge ears, their yellow whiskers and carefully combed hair, they breathed into the cradle the breath of their old bronchial cords, of forty years of cigars, of their moustaches and their stopped teeth, to gaze at the little hand, its skin as thin as the membrane about the pips of a tangerine, grasping, clutching at grandfather's finger.

"Extraordinary," said Noël Schoudler, "quite extraordinary how strong it is already!"

And the four men stayed gazing down at this enigma, this barely hatched combination of their blood, their ambitions, and their now distant loves.

Beneath the ceiling of their faces the infant began to turn crimson and squall feebly.

"At least that child should have everything to make him happy, if he knows how to make use of it," said Noël Schoudler, straightening up.

As a man who knew the value of things, the giant calculated all that the child inherited, or would one day inherit, all that was already present in the cradle: the bank, the sugar refineries, a great daily newspaper, a Holy Roman Empire title, the world-renown of the poet, his copyrights, the Château and old Urbain's estates and other lesser fortunes, as well as a ready-made position in aristocratic, financial, governmental, and literary circles.

Siegfried Schoudler interrupted the train of his son's thoughts and, pulling at his sleeve, whispered loudly, "What's he called?"

"Jean-Noël, after his grandfathers."

From his full height, bending once more his dark veiled glance upon

the richest infant in Paris, Noël proudly repeated to himself, "Jean-Noël Schoudler."

A siren sounded in a distant suburb of the city. The visitors cocked their heads as one man, all except the Patriarch who did not hear till another siren sounded closer to.

These were the early weeks of 1916. From time to time, in the evenings, a Zeppelin flew over the capital which screamed at its approach and then blacked itself out. Millions of window-panes went dark. The huge German airship flew slowly above the darkened mass of houses loosed a few bombs that fell haphazardly among the multitude of street and buildings, and then departed again.

"A block of flats was hit last night at Vaugirard. It seems that four people were killed, three of them women," said Jean de La Monnerie in the silence.

The quality of sound seemed to have changed in the room. Several seconds went by. There was no sound from outside except for the wheels of a cab from a nearby street.

Siegfried signed to his son, who helped him put on his fur-lined coat, then the old man sat down again.

The Baronne Schoudler, to keep the conversation going, said: "One of their horrible bombs fell on the tramlines. The rail was bent upward in the air and killed an unfortunate man on the pavement."

Sitting quite still, Noël Schoudler frowned.

The siren in the immediate neighbourhood began wailing. With a dignified gesture Madame de La Monnerie put her forefingers in her ears till the noise ceased.

There was a sound of footsteps in the corridor, doors slammed, a nurse came in.

She was a big elderly woman; her skin was rough and her movements masculine.

She lit the tallow night-light on the bedside table, made sure that the curtains were properly drawn, and turned out the electric light.

In the half-light the silhouettes of the visitors cast strange shadow on the wall opposite the patient.

"If the ladies and gentlemen wish to go down," said the nurse, "the shelter is in the building. The young lady cannot yet be taken down the doctor has forbidden it. Perhaps tomorrow . . ."

She took the infant from its cradle and wrapped it in a blanket.

"Am I alone on this floor?" the patient asked in a weak voice.

The nurse did not answer the question.

"Well now, you'll stay here quite quietly, and be good."

"I want my child here with me," she said, turning on her side and making a hollow of her body away from the window.

The nurse said merely, "Tch . . . tch . . ." and went away, carrying the baby with her.

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Through the open door, in the dim blue light of the corridor, the patient saw the other patients on the floor being wheeled along on trolleys. A few seconds elapsed.

"Noël, I think it would be wiser if you went down, because of your heart," said the Baronne Schoudler in a low voice, assumed to give an impression of being calm.

"Oh, as far as I'm concerned, it's of no importance," replied Noël Schoudler. "It's my father I'm thinking of."

Old Siegfried himself made no attempt to find excuses; he was already on his feet and waiting impatiently for someone to accompany him.

"Noël hates being upstairs during alerts," murmured the Baronne to Madame de La Monnerie; "it gives him heart-attacks."

The La Monneries looked upon the Schoudlers' anxiety with some contempt. They forgave them for being afraid, but not for showing it.

Madame de La Monnerie took a little round watch from her bag. "Jean, we must go if we are not to be late for the Opera," she said, emphasizing the word "Opera" so as to prove that the presence of the Zeppelin was making no change in their evening's programme.

"Yes, you're right, Juliette," replied the poet.

He buttoned up his overcoat, breathed deeply as if gathering courage and said in a flat voice, "I still have to go to the club. I'll drop you, and come back to join you for the second act."

"Don't bother, my dear, don't bother," said Madame de La Monnerie coldly. "Your brother will keep me company."

She leaned down towards her daughter.

"Thank you for coming, Mama," said the patient automatically as she received a brief kiss on the forehead.

The Baronne Schoudler next came forward to take her leave. She felt the patient's hand tighten about hers, clutching it almost; she felt a moment of hesitation, then thought: "After all, she's only my daughter-in-law. And since her mother's leaving her . . ."

Jacqueline's hand let go of hers.

"That William II is really a barbarian," said the Baronne to hide her embarrassment.

Hastily, some because of their fear, others because of their entertainment, or their barely secret assignation, the visitors went out, the women first, their hands to their hatpins, the men following in order of age. Then the door shut and there was silence.

The patient turned her eyes towards the vague whiteness of the empty cradle, then towards the full-faced photograph of a young officer of Dragoons, his head held high, which was illumined by the glow of the night-light on the bedside table. In a corner of the frame was enclosed another smaller photograph of the same officer dressed in a sheepskin coat and standing in the mud.

"François..." the young woman said softly. "François... Dear God, let nothing happen to François out there..."

Her eyes wide open in the semi-darkness, her ears intent, she listened to the sighing of her own breath.

Suddenly she heard the hum of a motor in the sky, then a dull explosion that nevertheless made the windows rattle, then the hum of the motor again, closer now.

Her hands close together, Jacqueline clutched the edge of the sheet and raised it to her mouth.

At this moment the door opened; a head crowned with white appeared; and Urbain de La Monnerie's shadow was thrown on the wall like that of an angry bird.

The old man had come back. He came and sat down by the bed, on the chair his sister-in-law had vacated a few minutes before, and contented himself with saying: "I have never much cared for the Opera. I can wait just as well with you. But what an idea to come to a place like this for your lying-in!"

The Zeppelin was drawing nearer, was indeed about to pass directly over the nursing-home.

BOOK ONE

THE MAGNATES

*To the Marquise de Brissac,
Princesse d'Arenberg*

The Death of the Poet

THE air was dry, cold, and sharp as crystal. Paris threw up its huge rosy glow towards the dark December sky that nevertheless was alight with stars. Millions of electric lights, thousands of gas street-lamps, rows of shop-windows, luminous signs running across roofs, streets criss-crossed with the headlights of cars, porticos of theatres, garret casements of the poor, windows of Parliament in late session, painters' studios, skylights of factories, lanterns of night-watchmen, reflections in the basins of fountains and on the stonework of colonnades, in plate-glass and on rings and white shirt-fronts, all these fires, rays and reflections were fused above the capital in a dome of light.

The great war had been over for two years. Paris had emerged, resplendent at the centre of the world. Never, perhaps, had both business and the things of the mind flourished so easily as towards the end of 1920; never had there been such a profusion of money, luxury, works of art, literature, rare foods, wine, speechmaking, jewellery, and fantasy. Doctrinaires from all over the world mouthed truths and paradoxes in the cafés of the Left Bank, and, surrounded by inspired idlers, aesthetes, permanent revolutionaries and temporary rebels, held every night the greatest, the most astonishing intellectual fair that had ever been seen in the history of the world. From every state and kingdom, ministers and diplomats rubbed shoulders at the beflowered receptions in the Quartier du Bois. The League of Nations, recently created, had chosen for the place of its first Assembly the Salon de l'Horloge, whence it had given to humanity the assurance of an era of happiness.

Women had shortened their dresses and begun to cut off their hair. The fortifications, dating from Louis Philippe—that belt of grass-covered fosses and bastions within which Paris had lived at ease for eighty years and where children from grey streets came to play on Sundays—had suddenly become too constricting: the forts were being pulled down, the trenches filled in; the town was to overflow the gardens of the poor and drown with its high waves of brick and cement the churches of ancient villages. The Republic had elected for its first post-victory president one of the most elegant men in France; but, a few weeks later, he lapsed into madness.

Paris was a society more than ever submissive to success; twenty thousand people at most held, in continually revised gradations, power, wealth, grace, and talent. They might be compared to pearls, then extremely fashionable, and which seemed to be their symbol; some were real, some cultured, some false and some baroque; there were Oriental human pearls that turned black after a few months, while others on the market seemed to increase in value day by day. But above all none of these twenty thousand people had the hard transparency, the sheer authentic brilliance of precious stones; theirs was rather the clouded, milky, impenetrable luminosity of the product of a marine secretion.

Two millions of other people surrounded them. They had not been born lucky and had not achieved success, or had not even attempted to find it. As in every period, it was these who scraped the fiddles, dressed the actresses, framed the pictures others had painted, and nailed down the carpets beneath the white shoes of fashionable weddings. The least happy were those who had neither on the one hand the satisfactions of labour nor, on the other, the joys of fame.

But no one could tell whether it was the twenty thousand who directed the others, organized their two millions of jobs and profited thereby, or whether it was the two millions who, from the need of action, of selling, of admiring, of feeling a solidarity with fame, secreted their diadems.

A crowd that has been standing for five hours to see a royal carriage drive past is happier than the seated prince who salutes them.

The men of the passing generation, whose old age had included the war, nevertheless thought that Paris was entering with them on a decline. They deplored the passing of manners and of a French tradition that was the heritage, so they affirmed, of the eighteenth century and which they had preserved intact. They forgot that their fathers and grandfathers had said the same thing: they also forgot that they themselves had added a number of rules to manners and had only recovered "tradition," in the sense in which they understood it, with old age. They thought the fashions exaggerated, and morals licentious; what had been presented to them at the time of their education as vices, what they had always either denied or dissimulated—homosexuality, drugs, perverse or complicated forms of eroticism—were displayed before them by the younger generation as almost normal amusements; it must also be said that the reprobation of the elderly was mixed with a certain envy. Modern art seemed to them unworthy of the name and the latest theories an expression of barbarism. They included athletic sports in their disapproval. On the other hand, they welcomed with interest the progress of science and watched, sometimes with amused pride, sometimes with slight annoyance, the techniques and mechanical inventions that were invading their material universe. But the uproar of modern

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life killed all pleasure for them and, regretting a calmer manner of being civilized—their manner—they felt assured, when they gazed out on the period, that these extravagant fireworks would neither endure nor come to anything but a bad end.

One might well shrug one's shoulders; but there was nevertheless more to their attitude than the eternal resentment of the elderly. Between society in 1910 and 1920 was a deeper and more defined gulf than between the society of 1820 and that of 1910. Paris was like those people of whom it is said: "he has aged ten years in a week." In four years of war France had aged by a century, perhaps her last century of great civilization; and the lust for living which Paris manifested was the vitality of the consumptive.

A society can be happy in spite of its internal wounds; disaster follows after.

Similarly, a society may appear happy though many of its members are suffering.

The young laid on their elders the responsibility for all their visible and foreseeable ills, the difficulties of today and the suspected calamities of tomorrow. The elderly, who had been or still were part of the twenty thousand, heard themselves accused of crimes which they were not conscious of having committed: egotism, cowardice, lack of understanding, frivolity, warmongering. Their accusers, moreover, did not themselves seem to show much generosity, faith or balance. When the elderly pointed this out to them, they cried: "But it is you who have made us what we are!"

And each man, though at the very hearth of the Parisian glow, pursued the black tunnel of his own life; the passer-by, unconscious of the great dome of light visible for several miles around, and beneath which he walked, could see nothing before him but the dark pavement.

II

Breathlessly, painfully hoisting her enormous haunches up the Métro stairs, Mother Lachaume emerged into the station yard.

"Don't walk so quickly, Simon," she said. "I can't keep up with you. I know you're in a hurry to get rid of me, but I must ask you to respect my varicose veins."

Her cheeks were marbled with the cold. With drooping eyelids and hirsute upper lip, she was preceded by great jets of milky-white breath that dissolved in the frosty air.

Simon Lachaume put down the suitcase and wiped his glasses.

All about them blue-bloused porters pushed their barrows, muffled travellers fussed, asked questions and hailed taxis. The cars were three deep along the pavement and the light from the long glass roof twinkled on their metalwork.

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"It's quite safe?" the old woman asked, raising a suspicious eye.

"Yes, yes."

She looked at the clock on the platform.

"Still twenty minutes to wait," she said.

"I must go," said Simon, "I'm already late."

He bent down and made a pretence of kissing the cheek that was flecked with grey hairs.

Mother Lauchaume seized her son's wrist in her great gnarled fingers.

"Don't wait another five years before coming to see us like you did last time," she said in a hoarse voice.

"No," said Simon, "I'll come to Mureaux as soon as I can, it's a promise."

She still held him by the wrist.

"And, in the meantime," said the old woman once again, "I assure you that if you could send us something, however little, it would prove to us that you do sometimes think of us."

She did not turn her face to the window to watch Simon going away. Thinking of her own sorrows, she extracted a yellow handkerchief from under her skirt and dabbed at her eyes.

III

A thick layer of straw had been spread over the street in front of the little private house in the Rue de Lübeck so as to muffle the sound of wheels. The custom of spreading straw before the doors of those seriously ill was going out with horses, and indeed still existed only among a few old families as a sort of pre-funeral rite.

Simon Lachaume waited for a long moment, his hand on the large brass bell-pull.

A high black motor-car was parked with its sidelights on, while the chauffeur walked to and fro to stretch his legs.

The door of the house opened. An old servant bowed his head to the young man.

At the same instant, Isabelle, the niece of the house's owner, appeared on the staircase.

"Oh, come in quickly, Monsieur Lachaume," she said, replacing a lock of hair that had fallen across her forehead. "He's waiting for you."

Isabelle d'Huisnes was thirty years old. She was wearing a woollen dress. Her dark, plain, triangular face was drawn with fatigue; there were dark circles beneath her eyes.

Simon put his grey coat with its crumpled lapels on a great Renaissance chest among the fine coats of black serge and the capes with fur collars, their buttonholes ornamented with ribbons or rosettes of the Legion of Honour, and hurriedly wiped his glasses with his thumbs.

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Through the half-open door of the little salon, he caught sight of two thin, elderly gentlemen with long legs and narrow boots.

"He is perfectly conscious, perfectly lucid," said Isabelle, preceding Simon upstairs.

On the first floor they crossed the study to which Simon had so often come: Chinese bibelots, red lacquer furniture with strange black flowers, bound books, precious books, paper-backed books, dusty books, dog-eared books, new and uncut books, scattered papers, engravings. Two huge withered chrysanthemums, their stalks sunk in dark liquid, should have been thrown away days ago.

In the room next door the poet Jean de La Monnerie lay dying.

Simon Lachaume entered a room furnished in Empire style. The velvet of the chairs and the double curtains were faded yellow. A piece of silk, also yellow, and edged with tarnished lace, formed the lampshade at the bedhead and filtered the light. On the marble top of the chest of drawers was a replica of the poet's bust that had been made by Rivolta in about 1890; the moulder had given this copy the colour of bronze, but a scratch on the nose betrayed the fact that its real material was plaster. Before the looking-glass above the chimney, a great marble clock ticked loudly second by second. The poet had been working in his room immediately before his illness; by a window was a marquetry card-table laden with papers, letters and books.

There was a smell of fever and accumulated age, of Turkish tobacco, benzoin for inhalations, evaporated pure alcohol, and sweetened draughts, an odour at once sharp and sweet, a staleness maintained at a high temperature by the radiator and the coal fire in the grate.

Upon a huge bed, its posts ornamented with bronze rings, Jean de La Monnerie was lying, his eyes closed, his body slightly raised on the pillows. His complexion was purple; several days' growth of beard lay like a deposit of salt on his sunken cheeks. The long lock of hair that normally concealed his baldness now lay across the pillow-case; his emaciated neck showed deep furrows and flecked the round collar of his nightdress with perspiration. The sheets were crumpled.

A man of some sixty years of age, in evening dress, with a strong, self-satisfied face, silver hair, and a clear, well-shaven complexion, held the poet's wrist between fingers and thumb as he followed with his eyes the second-hand of a gold watch.

When Simon approached, Jean de La Monnerie opened his eyes. His grey stare, with a cast in the left eye, sought, wandered, and finally focused.

"My friend, how kind of you," said the poet in a hoarse voice, his breath sounding in his vocal cords, "to put yourself out."

Polite to the end, he began to make the introductions: "Monsieur Simon Lachaume, a young graduate of the utmost talent . . ."

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The man in the dinner-jacket made a sign with his head above his starched shirt and said simply: "Lartois."

"This morning my confessor," said the poet, "this evening, you, my doctor and faithful friend; now my disciple, shall I say, or my indulgent acolyte? And then this angel who watches constantly over me," he added for the benefit of his niece. "I ought to die happy."

He sighed. The tendons in his throat contracted.

"Really, really, you may very reasonably expect to get better. As soon as the fever abates . . ." said Lartois, his voice gentle, his professional mask cast aside. "You'll astonish us yet, great man that you are!"

"There is no oil left," the poet murmured.

There was a moment of silence in which only the seconds could be heard as the marble clock marked them.

In the dressing-room the nursing nun, the points of her head-dress pinned up, was boiling syringes. The old man's left eye sought Simon questioningly.

The latter, by way of answer, took a parcel of printed proofs from his coat pocket.

"When is it coming out?" asked Jean de La Monnerie.

"Next month," said Simon.

An expression of mingled sorrow and pride crossed the poet's face which, for an instant, seemed to make the purple visage younger.

"This young man," he explained to the doctor, "is making me the subject, the sole subject, of his doctor's thesis. All right, Lartois, I feel better, go to your dinner-party. Dinners are good things. And then when I am . . ."

The silence took on a weight all its own.

"... present yourself for election to my seat in the Academy," he finished.

Professor Lartois, member of the Academy of Medicine, who was about to lose in the person of Jean de La Monnerie one of his most sure electors in his imminent candidature for the Académie Française, looked about him, regretting that these last words, this sort of investiture, had had no more important witnesses. For the first time he paid attention to the ill-dressed young man, with his too-big head and his steel-rimmed glasses, who was standing near him, and made him a sort of private sign of admiration that signified: "What a fine mind he has. Sincere and courteous to the last!"

He let a little laugh escape between his teeth, as if a joke had been made.

"I leave you with your glory," he said, placing his hand in a friendly way on Simon's sleeve. "I'll look in again about eleven."

He went out, followed by Isabelle.

With his long, brown-stained fingers Jean de La Monnerie toyed with the packet of proofs.

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"Most moving," he said, "most moving."

Once again, his grey eyes slowly ran over the young man's face and then seemed to become hazy.

"It's a fine word, *glory*," he murmured.

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IV

Lartois went downstairs with a light step, his head held high.

"Well, Doctor, how long do you give him?" asked Isabelle in a low voice, her eyes bright with tears.

"Everything depends on this," he answered, putting his hand over his heart, "but as far as I can see, it's a question of hours. After today's two heart-attacks . . ."

They went into the little salon. Urbain and Robert de La Monnerie rose to their feet.

"I can only repeat to you," Lartois said to them, "what I have just been saying to Isabelle. Death may occur at any moment. The congestion of the lungs appears to have moderated, but the cardiac condition . . . There comes a time when our imprecise science can do no more, and with so dear a friend, it's all the more heartbreaking. My dear girl, have you by any chance a sheet of writing-paper?"

"For a prescription?" Isabelle asked.

"No, for a bulletin."

The two brothers said nothing. The Marquis nodded his great coronet of upright hair two or three times.

Robert de La Monnerie, the General, the youngest of the four La Monnerie brothers, blew on the red rosette which decorated the lapel of his coat, as if he wished to remove dust from it.

Lartois wrote: "Evening Bulletin."

Suddenly his hand stopped. Two curious bright points of light appeared in his eyes. Isabelle was leaning over the table; the shape of her rather drooping breasts was clearly defined through her woollen dress; her olive-skinned body seemed to exhale fatigue. Lartois's glance rose to Isabelle's eyes, but she, her whole consciousness concentrated on her sorrow, did not notice it.

They all imagined that Lartois was lost in thought. The two little lights in his eyes had gone out, and the doctor wrote in a rapid narrow hand: "A notable improvement in the respiratory condition. Some cardiac weakness. Prognosis reserved."

"Issued in those terms," he thought, "it will be suitable for everyone, both for the layman and for my colleagues. No one will be taken by surprise . . ." He signed it: "Professor Émile Lartois."

From seeing his signature reproduced in the newspapers below the names of famous invalids, he had a sense of becoming famous himself.

He went out into the hall, put on the overcoat handed to him by the

servant, slipped his well-kept hands into wash-leather gloves, and got into his black limousine which was parked in front of the house.

A few minutes later the nursing nun walked down the passage that divided the upper floor, and knocked at Madame de La Monnerie's door. There was no reply and she knocked again.

"Come in!" called an impatient voice.

Madame de La Monnerie, sitting at a trestle-table covered with coloured crayons and little pots of paint, was in process of making dolls from crumb of bread, dressing them in silver paper. Her long dressing-gown of quilted velvet spread out on the floor about her chair. Her piled-up white hair had been given a blue rinse.

"I'm listening to you, Sister," she said. "Speak up."

"Madame, your niece has asked me . . ." said the nun.

"Oh, my niece!" said the old lady, turning round with a heave of her shoulders.

And when the nun had delivered her message, she replied, her expression unmoved: "He often got on very well without me while he was alive, he can very well die without me too. He has caused me enough unpleasant scenes already."

Then she said: "Has my daughter been informed?"

"Yes, Madame; by telegram this morning."

"Everything's all right then," said Madame de La Monnerie.

And she returned to her dancers and her shepherds, each a couple of inches high.

On the ground floor, in the kitchen, the old servant, who happened that day to be wearing "an old pair of Monsieur's trousers," was sitting, his hands on his knees. From time to time he got up to go and answer the telephone whose bell had been muffled with a piece of cloth, or to open the door when someone came to leave a belated card or ask for news.

A half-century of literary celebrity was drawing to a close with these last tokens of respect received in the night.

The tearful cook was preparing "a little something, because Monsieur le Comte's brothers must have something to eat."

In the little salon old Urbain said: "As for the funeral, I can't possibly have all those people at Mauglaives. Besides, it's too far away."

"The d'Huisnes have a vault in the cemetery of Montmartre; that would be much easier; I don't think Juliette will make any difficulty about it," replied the General.

One of his knees had been damaged by a wound and he held his leg stiffly out in front of him like a board.

There was a silence in which the nun could be heard walking back along the passage on the first floor.

Then the elder said: "I don't like that cemetery."

"Oh, merely for provisional burial!" muttered the younger.

Jean de La Monnerie was aware of the light pressure of his glasses on the base of his nose. His perceptions seemed clouded with mist.

His only really precise sensation, because it was the only one that really mattered to him, was the permanent pressure under his left collar-bone, the invisible hand lodged in his breast clutching at his arteries. He knew that beneath this pressure life was fighting for itself, and without assistance.

Before him, on a book-rest, lay *Jean de La Monnerie, or the Fourth Generation of the Romantics*.

The familiar smell, which came from paper with still-damp ink, was in his nostrils for the last time, but more as if it were a memory than a present reality; his hand slowly turned over the proofs, section by section, in thin batches of sixteen pages.

His eyes slipped along the printed lines as if on a rail; he cared much for the judgment of the future. The word "future," whenever it came into his thoughts, flashed like the wake of a comet across huge, dark, still amorphous continents.

The poet felt that he had reached the edge of eternal annihilation. Nothing would remain of his personality on this side of the great gulf, on the inhabited planet, but what might be contained in books similar to this thesis in which he saw the formulation of the only effigy of himself that was transmissible, colourless as alcohol, lifeless as a marble bust, and false as history.

The thin, tenuous logic of the text made him feel the immensity of his own foundering personality.

So many sudden, dazzling visions, so many answers almost seized at the ends of shadowy labyrinths, so many times had certainty faded at the moment he thought he had grasped it at last: it was these incommunicable things that were to dissolve for ever from the centre of the universe. And the astonishment, permanent, inherent, at the grandeur of the world and the ignoble acts of human beings. Who could reconstitute all that?

He alone knew that he had lived, and how he had lived, and from what springs he had drunk. He alone knew that he had attained, as so few human beings have, to the ultimate barrier, that almost day by day he had hurled himself against the great rampart of black marble which is the boundary of knowledge, that he had searched it for apertures, and had attempted to climb it so as to catch a glimpse of the infinite.

"It is because of such moments," he thought, "that I am a great man, and for no other reason; because on certain nights I have swooned in the act of writing."

And in spite of all that, he could contemplate, beyond his glasses,

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the written image of himself with the complacent satisfaction, the personal smile, which a portrait invariably arouses in its subject.

The poet heard his own voice diffused as if through cotton-wool.

"It's good, very remarkable indeed," he said.

The pressure had moved a little, as if the fingers in his breast had opened to stretch themselves and then closed more tightly again.

"I must not think too hard," he told himself, "I must not go as far as the black wall . . ."

He went on turning over the sixteen-page sections of proofs, and wherever he came on a name, a date, a title, it cut down through the layers of his memory. Hidden recollections, stratified in the deep earth of life, suddenly came to light.

Jean de La Monnerie saw a young man in light-coloured trousers and embroidered waistcoats, who rode, fenced, and held those about him in contempt. How right life had shown his contempt to be! In the evening the young man wore frilled shirts, smoked long Italian cigars from which one had to extract a straw, visited Leconte de Lisle and knew that he had the genius to create a huge body of work that would dominate the centuries. There were still in the chest of drawers, beneath the bust, two or three of those frilled shirts, too narrow now and turned yellow by the years.

"Un oiseau sur le lac tombait avec les feuilles . . ."

He felt a sensation of irritation and disgust; this line, whose quotation his eye had noted while turning a fresh batch of proofs, was the first line of the poem that had made him famous as a young man of twenty-four, "at a time when," Lachaume wrote, "one could still become celebrated on the strength of a single poem"; it was the poem which had found its way into every anthology, was recited at every poetry-reading, mentioned in every fan letter, referred to by every society flatterer. Had he never then, he, Jean de La Monnerie, written anything more important, anything of greater worth; were the nine volumes of his poetic works no more than trash, that these verses should so consistently, even at the grave-side, be thrown up in his path, these thirty lines written so casually, in which he himself could no longer recognize the old audacity, now faded? Oh, lazy public, so persistent in its refusal to know any but the works of youth! Oh, the meanness of a public that will never vouchsafe its enthusiasm a second time!

What was more, La Monnerie had taken the subject of his poem from Sully-Prudhomme during an after-dinner conversation. Sully was talking of a subject he had in mind; La Monnerie had caught the idea on the wing. Who had ever noticed it? Yes, Lachaume had noticed a similarity; but, according to him, it was the author of *Vaines Tendresses* who had been inspired by Jean de La Monnerie and who, that same year, had made use of the central theme of *L'oiseau sur le lac*.

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Sully-Prudhomme had been first a friend, then an irritating rival, almost an enemy. There was no point in telling the truth now. He owed Sully nothing.

"A poet with a name like that should change it by deed-poll," he murmured.

He felt that talking was a mistake, because each time he did so the pressure beneath his collar-bone became more violent.

However, when he read the chapter-heading "The Forerunner of the Symbolists," he could not prevent himself making an irritated gesture, as if he were sweeping all his successors away with the back of his hand, and he said: "Those Epigoni!"

With the avidity of a biographer, Simon Lachaume, his attention concentrated, gathered the comments that fell from the mauve lips, and repeated them to himself several times over so as not to forget them.

Sixteen pages further on, the poet's glance stopped at a poem quoted in full, which bore nothing but a dedication for title: "To the Friend of the 16th January 1876." The grey eyes rested on it for a long time, so long that Simon thought the old man had fallen asleep. But no; behind his glasses he was searching, seeking without success to snatch a face, a name from time; and yet, if he had written that date, it must have been to underline a significant memory. And now the fact alone was there, with no loosened hair, no scent, no address, nothing. It was appalling. '76. That year he had had—how many was it?—four mistresses. Was it before the Casini, at the very beginning of the year? The Casini had had her tempers, her rages, her scenes, and today seemed to him more of a stranger, further off, more dead, than if he had never slept with her. In any case, it had been long before his marriage with Juliette, a marriage of convenience arranged by Urbain. "If you go on like this," his elder brother had said, "you soon won't have a penny in the world. You'd do better to marry the little d'Huisnes." 1876: a wonderful year! He had been thirty years old.

The old man seemed to make contact again with the exterior world.

"How old are you, Simon?" he asked hoarsely.

"Thirty-three, Maître."

The old man sighed. The people in the room, Isabelle, the nun, seemed to be floating in a watery translucence.

At the same time, Simon, gazing at him, thought enviously: "When he was my age he was already famous, he had written a considerable body of work and had every woman at his feet." To console himself, Simon went on: "I am one of those who succeed late."

"I shall not have the time . . ." the old man murmured sadly, shaking his head.

Simon and Isabelle thought he was referring to the proofs.

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"Are you tired, Uncle?" asked his niece. "I will take away..."

"No, no, not that," said the dying man clutching the reading-desk. "No. Simon, I ask of you... my papers, my rough drafts... I trust you... no letters for fifty years."

Simon, deeply affected, lowered his head as a sign of assent.

Isabelle turned away, her face wet with tears.

She made an excuse to leave the room; this conscious dying was more than she could bear.

Taking advantage of his niece's departure and of the fact that the nun was busy in the dressing-room, the old man whispered to Simon: "Give me something to write with."

Simon brought him a sheet of blank paper and handed him his fountain-pen, thinking: "It is my pen with which Jean de La Monnerie is writing his last lines."

The pen suited the poet ill. In a trembling hand, that tore the paper in places, he wrote: "I have loved you dearly." He signed it with a big "J," folded the paper with quivering fingers and wrote on the outside: "Madame Éterlin," and handed it to Simon with a smile of excuse and complicity, without thinking to give him the address.

"Thank you," he murmured.

Then, as his niece came back, he turned his eyes to the reading-desk once more.

"Car nous irons mâcher la cendre de nos pistes..."

The letters danced before the dying man; exhausted by his latest effort, he could recognize the lines written half a century earlier only by the arrangement of the black and white on the page.

"Car nous irons mâcher la cendre de nos pistes..."

Nous traînerons la vie et nous deviendrons vieux,

Tout cela simplement pour que ces heures tristes

Nous composent un jour des souvenirs heureux..."

Clearly, even at that time, he already knew...

And suddenly there was a sort of conflagration in his mind. In a condition of both semi-consciousness and super-consciousness, he had the impression of an extraordinary logical progression that was yet no more than a dazzling confusion from which emerged, falling into place, making a complete whole, the uniformed schoolboy from the Jesuit school, the young man with the embroidered waistcoats, Victor Hugo in the Place des Vosges, his face hidden behind a prophetic beard, the swooning nights of work, the Casini screaming, the certainty that the creator is always greater than his creation, and, through this, his reconciliation with God; a Brussels crowd on their feet, their applause sounding like rain, and, through the noise, the outline of the work of art eternally glimpsed, beside which all his poems were but the capitals of

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columns or the bas-reliefs prepared for the ultimate temple, the definitive work, the answer to the absolute, the tower with a vista of the infinite, the key to the secret doors in the black wall, the poem that would leave nothing more to say. And now, once again, he felt the red-hot hand in his breast, thought of the continents of the future, now invisible under the red glow of innumerable stars; and then weaving flames that resembled the embroidered incrustations of the uniform of the Academy and yet were not; and then a huge tree with golden foliage; all fusing together and shining with a bright light. It was as if an actor were held in the brilliant illumination of a stage in all his parts at once.

During the few seconds that these visions lasted, the old man grew restless, and from among the half-formed phrases he uttered, Simon was able to distinguish the following:

"How many ideas are lost for a single one captured!"

And then these words: "The sleep of Orpheus," and then a line of verse:

"Dieu n'être au bout de tout que son repos parfait."

The ancient machine for the manufacture of Alexandrines had set itself in motion once again before stopping for ever.

The nun came to the bed and gave the dying man an injection.

He relaxed and grew calmer.

He had not noticed that the reading-desk had been taken away. The mist had now closed in on his eyes.

The hand beneath his collar-bone had loosened its grasp, had almost disappeared. It must not be loosened completely. For life itself was implicit in the pain, and the dying man longed agonizingly for the pressure's return. He wanted to cough, but dared not, for fear of suddenly destroying his consciousness. He preferred to breathe with a rattle in his throat for, however tiresome it might be, it was proof that he still lived.

He had the impression that his speech, the sequence of his thought, his memory itself, were held together only by a thin thread, the thin silken thread of a cocoon. Too violent a movement or thought might break the thread. Then the diverse elements of life would separate like ears of corn from a scattered sheaf. Or, rather, the immaterial cogs would flow apart in the silence and cease to act on each other any more. The fire was extinguished, nothing was left but ashes that might be dispersed by a single breath.

He heard himself say once again: "I shall not have time to finish it."

He knew that he would never see the door open in the dark wall.

He longed for sleep.

A hand touched him, removing the light weight of his glasses.

The two brothers had gone up to the bedroom and were sitting waiting. The General yawned, looked at his watch, and blew on his rosette.

Simon had risen at their entry, to leave his place at the bedside free, but Urbain had stopped him with a gesture of the hand, saying: "Stay where you are, stay where you are."

Whenever the dying man in his sleep made a rattling sound in his throat, their heads rose and the nun, with a nod of her head-dress, reassured them in their anxiety. The moment had not yet come.

Suddenly, at about a quarter past ten, the poet half-sat up. His hand clutched at the sheet, seized Simon's and held it. His face had grown pale. His eyes lacked focus and one alone rested on Simon without appearing to see him. It was as if the dying man were walking towards a precipice and could not stop. From his throat there issued the harsh sound of an unprimed pump, and his head fell back.

The nun, seizing a hypodermic syringe, sank the needle into dead flesh.

Simon never knew how long he sat there looking at the fixed grey eyes beneath the half-drooping lids. By an odd sort of sympathetic reaction he felt his own heart weaken, and he wondered for a moment whether he were not himself about to have a heart-attack. He had to take several deep breaths.

He thought it was his duty to close the eyes which had addressed to him, Simon, their last indecipherable message. He tried to summon all his intellectual piety to accomplish the act. But from the nun's white sleeve two short, calloused fingers closed the poet's eyes with rapid, expert precision. Then the nun made the sign of the cross, knelt heavily down, and for some moments nothing was to be heard but the sound of the marble clock.

At length Urbain de La Monnerie said: "Poor Jean, it's all over. The first of the four of us."

He had suddenly subsided. He was gazing at the carpet, and his eyes were red.

Robert, the General, automatically took out a cigarette, raised it to his lips, and then, ashamed, put it back in his pocket.

"He was twelve years old when you were born," went on Urbain, looking at the General. "We went together to look at you in your cradle. I remember it very well."

The General nodded his head as if he, too, could remember the occasion.

Simon was aware of a weight, a warmth, tears against his chest. Isabelle had thrown herself into his arms and was muttering: "Poor Uncle, poor Uncle, you gave him his last moment of happiness."

Hot tears flowed down Simon's neck.

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"I must lay him out," said the nun, rising to her feet.

"I will help you," said Isabelle. "Yes, yes, I want to, I do really."

The men left the room, half out of respect and half out of cowardice.

As he was going downstairs, Simon thought of the two women stripping the old, long, thin body, and wiping it with cotton-wool as one might an infant's.

Half an hour later, candles were burning at each end of the bed; a spray of box lay with its dry leaves dipped in a saucer. In a corner, a wall-bracket had been left alight, because the flames of the candles were insufficient.

Beneath the smooth sheets, in a clean nightshirt, the body of Jean de La Monnerie lay with its hands crossed about a crucifix, his chin supported by a bandage.

His long profile was silhouetted against the yellow wallpaper. His long lock of hair had been replaced across his skull. His skin seemed to have been pulled tight, had lost its wrinkles, and had taken on the colour of a slightly pink stone. The corpse seemed to have grown younger; and as if it were consciously vain of the care that was being lavished on it, the face had assumed an expression of quiet content.

Everyone was present.

Madame de La Monnerie entered the room, upright, with a firm step. She went up to the bed, shook the spray of box four times over her husband, and said decisively: "He looks very well."

Then she left the room again.

Professor Lartois arrived a little after eleven o'clock. The cook opened the door to him, because the aged Paul, overcome, was incapable of moving.

"Monsieur le Comte has passed over," she said to the Professor.

Lartois went up to the bedroom without taking off his cloak, and, raising the dead man's eyelid with his finger for a last examination, then closing it again, said: "It has happened more quickly than I expected."

Then he drew Simon Lachaume into the passage and asked him about the last moments.

"He died well," said Lartois, "very well. Let us hope that we shall all have the same dignity at the end."

When Simon told him of the last words: "I shall not have time to finish it," Lartois said: "Undoubtedly, he was in process of composing a poem. Old men's minds, you see, concentrate upon whatever has been the principal occupation of their lives. In everything else, their memory, their understanding, their capacity for emotion becomes sterile and exhausted. Similarly you will find a completely mad mathematician still competent at differential calculus. Our minds only last in relation to their speciality. A little while ago you might have asked our friend the name of his daughter, he might well have been unable to tell

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you. But he spoke to you of Sully-Prudhomme, and he spoke to me of the Academy . . ."

He fell silent for a while.

"That's the way it goes," he added. "It's a question of blood to the lobes of the brain, or something of which we yet know but little."

"Professor," said Simon, hesitatingly, "do you know, have you met, Madame Éterlin? How could I get her address?"

"Indeed, yes, that is a very delicate thought of yours," replied Lartois. "Yes, I shall go and visit her myself. Poor thing. Did he speak of her? Her address, wait a moment."

He took out his engagement book.

"Twelve Rue Tissandre, at Boulogne-sur-Seine. Goodbye, my dear fellow; we shall undoubtedly meet again."

"I shall be very happy to do so, Professor," said Simon sincerely.

Soon afterwards Madame Polant arrived, alerted by her sure instinct for catastrophe. She was a little woman, her skin still unlined, who had not been very happy in her marriage. She wore an old hat, and a boa of black rabbit over her coat. A small tuft of hairs, growing from a wart, flourished on the lower part of her right cheek. Her habit of frequenting of sacristies and the houses of the bereaved had kept her complexion deceptively fresh, while her clothes retained a smell of tapers.

She acted as occasional secretary to the La Monnerie family and when one of them asked: "How old is Polant now?", the reply was always in the form of a calculation: "Let's see now, she first came to us in '92 . . ." Polant invariably appeared at times of mourning.

She had barely gone half-way upstairs before her handkerchief was to her eyes. She made gestures of grief to those present, fell into prayer beside the bed with many genuflexions and tremblings of lip, rose to embrace Isabelle who called her "my poor Polant"; then, hastily drying her tears, she started immediately on her necrophilic labours.

She could not forgive herself for having arrived too late. Laying out corpses was part of her stock-in-trade. She thought she might make up for it by beautifying the corpse. In a low voice, though not without pride, she asserted: "I know how to shave the dead."

Under the pretext of taking charge of everything and leaving the relations of the deceased to their sorrow, she began by drawing the brothers into a corner and starting on a long whispered conversation. Old Urbain and the General listened, pursed their lips and from time to time nodded acquiescence. The lying-in-state must take place in the big drawing-room, the corpse dressed in the uniform of the Academy. Madame Polant would go in the morning to register the death at the Mairie. Clearly the Comtesse must not be bothered with such things, nor poor Mademoiselle Isabelle. Madame Polant would also take charge of the funeral arrangements. She had an understanding

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with Borniol. She would get into touch with someone in the head office and discuss details of the estimate, a matter of the first importance, and would then present it to the gentlemen for their approval. Had Jacqueline, who was on her way to Naples with her husband, been informed? She had. Good. As far as the announcements were concerned, Polant had kept all those of previous deaths, which would enable her to manage the thing properly and leave no one out; she also had the family list of addresses. She would not sleep all night, she would come to an arrangement with the nun about the vigil by the dead; they could rely on her and her discreet activity.

VII

Simon Lachaume walked home by the Alma Bridge and the quays along the Seine. The temperature had dropped several degrees. Simon heard his footsteps ring out in the steely air. But he barely felt the discomfort of the cold. His large head was full of wonderful thoughts.

He had been present, with his completed thesis, at the death of Jean de La Monnerie. The great poet had fixed his eyes on him at the last, had squeezed his hand at the precise moment of his death. Great men shake hands across the gulf of eternity. It was a sign, an unmistakable sign. The incidence of genius was undoubtedly constant in proportion to the human race as are rare gases to the atmosphere; Simon was certain of being a part of that constant, that he was one of those men who guide humanity through the paths of action and imagination.

This day had been vital, a turning-point; the door was closing on a painful part of his life, to open again on a fabulous future, filled with innumerable, thronging possibilities. Fate had struck the gong.

"I shall not have time to finish it." No one ever had time to finish anything. But others took on the job, entered as part of a new shift, shouldered the work of the world.

Simon thought sadly that the house in the Rue de Lübeck would cease to be a place of friendly and welcoming patronage and would become a house of memory and pilgrimage. Yet, no. In the first place it would be a house of work. The great poet had confided his papers to him. That was the first and immediate task: to select with a pious hand, to prepare the posthumous edition; nothing of the poet's thought must be lost that could be preserved. He remembered the phrase about lost ideas. He would quote it in the introduction. For he would write the introduction himself. He was already beginning to think it out.

When he passed the Institute, with its dark façade at the end of the open semi-circular space, he said to himself: "One day I too shall be there."

He was in a hurry to get home, to make a note of every event, every detail, every thought that had crossed his mind during the evening, in

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all their immediacy. But when he had crossed the Quartier Latin, and reached the two small rooms he occupied on the fourth floor of the Rue Lhomond, Simon suddenly felt exhausted. His wife woke up, her eyes swollen with sleep; her complexion dull, the hair about her neck sticky with sweat. She complained of having waited for him, and then of having fallen asleep. In a few words he explained what had happened. "Oh, tell me," she said.

"I'll tell you the whole story tomorrow. Go to sleep," he replied.

He knew that if he told it now, he would blunt the clear, sharp edge of his story as far as his writing of it was concerned. He sat down at his desk; but the presence behind him of his wife, who kept tossing in the bed in fretful search of sleep, the smell of the stale air of the flat, and above all his own exhaustion prevented his writing a single word. He was hungry. He went and ate a dry biscuit that smelt of soap, then came back again. For a long moment he sat before the paper, searching for the opening sentence of his account; words refused to take shape. Phrases would not come. And yet, but a little while ago, he had been so sure of himself. "Notes, simple notes," he kept on repeating to himself, but even these were impossible to him.

His wife told him to come to bed.

"Your mother got off all right?" she asked, half-asleep.

"Yes, yes, quite all right."

And simultaneously he was thinking: "I shall have time tomorrow morning, it's Sunday."

But so that there might be a record for the history of literature and for his own history—he already saw them fuse—an authentic document, he wrote in his diary under that day's date, and taking care that it should be written in ink: "Tonight I closed the eyes of Jean de La Monnerie."

For lack of a better, he was already building a shallow, half-lying portrait.

When he slipped into bed, he lay on the far edge, where the sheets were still cold, as remote as possible from his wife, who had gone to sleep again. He turned off the bedside light.

His spectacles put aside, lying flat on his back, his eyes closed in the darkness, Simon Lachaume, his body stiff and his head thrown back, adopted the attitude that would be his when he lay, in full dress, on his deathbed. The whole of his attention was focused on this spectacle. He imagined the long, haughty features of an old man superimposed on his broad face, and, if it had not been for the warm breathing a few inches from him, he might almost have been able to believe in it.

THE OBSEQUIES

CHAPTER TWO

The Obsequies

ABOVE the wall the branches hung over the street. At the end of the narrow garden, stripped bare by winter, lay the house, plain and white, one storey high.

Marie-Hélène Éterlin received Simon Lachaume with the words, "Yes, I know . . . Émile Lartois kindly, indeed humanely, telephoned and warned me of your call. Besides, my dear Jean often spoke of you and with so much interest. Thank you so much for coming to see me."

She was middle-aged; but Simon could not place her age precisely. She had a coil of ash-blond hair rolled on the nape of her neck. She wore a grey dress of unfashionable length; its corsage, oddly frilled with tulle and lace, revealed the slenderness of her neck. Her forehead was unlined, her eyes showed that she had been weeping; the flesh of her face, though still smooth, was covered with fine hairs and beginning to sag.

Marie-Hélène Éterlin took from him the piece of paper Simon had brought her, read it, carried it to her lips, and remained for almost a full minute with her hands over her eyes.

The interior decoration was in strong contrast to the modest exterior of the house. Here was nothing but mirrors, gilding, spun glass, strange, tortured furniture, glass walls giving off iridescent reflections; a sort of Spanish-Venetian atmosphere. The whole drawing-room seemed to be shimmering at the end of a glass-blower's pipe; one was afraid to move about in it; a single sneeze might shatter it.

"Had his wife not been so spiteful, we might have been so happy."

Simon remained silent, his expression at once sorrowful and considerate.

"I was not even allowed to see him during his last illness," she went on. "I could scarcely get news of him on the telephone. And his niece was hand in glove with her aunt. Those two horrible creatures tortured him to the end."

She said this in a low, sweet, ethereal voice, as if her heart were too pure to emphasize the wickedness of others.

Simon dared not deceive her, dared not tell her that Jean de La Monnerie had called his niece "an angel," and that he had died, all said and done, unhappy only from regret at dying.

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"And he was so good, so wonderful," she went on. "He used to come here every day, every single day. Even during the war, when there were air-raids, I used to hear a car stop in the street. It was he. He used to come all that long way just to be with me, sometimes only for a few minutes, see how I was, and make sure I wasn't frightened. He always used to come in and sit straight down in that very chair you're sitting in."

Instinctively Simon touched the fragile arm of the chair with his hand.

"I can't believe that he'll never again come here," she went on, "that he'll never unexpectedly open the door again, putting his eyeglass in his eye, and that you won't get up and give him your chair. It would have been eight years in a few months' time."

Again she covered her eyes, extracting a diaphanous handkerchief from behind her in the depths of the armchair.

"I'm sorry," she said.

In the meantime Simon was making a calculation: "Seventy-six less eight, it must therefore have begun when he was sixty-eight."

Suddenly she raised her head and looked straight at him; Simon noticed that her eyes were of a peculiar shade of mauve and exceptionally small. He was overwhelmed by such intensity of sorrow and loss concentrated in such a tiny space.

"You realize, Monsieur Lachaume," she said, "that I abandoned everything for him, husband, children, everything. All my friends cut me. I nearly ruined myself. But you will approve of what I did, having lived so close to him, so close to his thought. When one has had the luck to meet a man like him, a man who dominates his period from such a height, when one has had the luck to be singled out by him, when he asks for a little happiness, one has no right . . . It becomes a duty, and nothing else matters. I arranged this house so that I might entertain him here. We chose every piece of furniture together, just the things he liked. We bought this table, for instance, in Florence, when we were travelling together. Do you see those fans in the cabinet behind you? He loved fans; he used to say: 'Fans are a reflection of life'."

She got up.

"Come and see the bedroom," she said.

She tripped ahead of him. From behind she still looked like a young woman. Her waist was slender.

She led Simon into a room hung with pale-blue silk covered with golden flowers. On the chest of drawers was another copy of the bust of Jean de La Monnerie, but this one was in white plaster, with no scratch on the nose. The pattern of the silk was repeated in the upholstery of the chairs. The room was lit by two little alabaster lamps.

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"He always said that the decoration inspired him to work," declared Madame Éterlin. "In the afternoon he often put the brushes and bottles aside and sat down at my dressing-table to write."

She moved about the room, caressing the edge of a piece of furniture, the back of a scarlet bird on the mantelpiece. For a long moment she stood still before her bed.

"And right up to the end he was a wonderful lover," she said with serene immodesty. "That also is one of the attributes of genius."

Somewhat embarrassed, Simon Lachaume turned to look at the plaster bust.

"Yes," said Madame Éterlin, "he liked to have his bust in the rooms he lived in."

Simon could not help imagining this woman stretched out on the bed, the corpse of the day before yesterday making love to her under the eyes of the bust.

He shivered and turned towards the door.

"And now," said Madame Éterlin, halting half-way down the stairs, "I've nothing left. No one will come to see me any more. There's nothing left to me but to live by and for his memory. I've had eight years of happiness. It was wonderful. And now it's over. Henceforth I shall live the life of an old woman. How old do you think I am?"

Simon was extremely embarrassed. He thought, "Fifty-five at least," at once took off ten years and feared his flattery was too obvious.

"I don't know," he said; "forty-five, forty-six . . ."

"You're more generous than most," she replied. "I'm usually thought to be fifty. I'm forty-three."

She seemed to bear him no grudge, and herself accompanied him to the hall door, extending her hand with its pale-nailed fingers palm downwards. Simon was not used to kissing people's hands. Awkwardly he raised it to his lips.

A fleeting smile appeared about Madame Éterlin's lips, the first since the beginning of their interview.

"You're exactly as Jean described you," she said; "sensitive, intelligent . . ."

Yet he had hardly opened his mouth three times during his visit, and the last time he had committed a monumental blunder.

"People to whom one can say things like that straight off are rare," she added, automatically fingering sticks of variegated glass standing in a high vase. "It was like that with Jean. Come and see me again whenever you like. We can talk about him! I'll show you some poems of his that no one else has seen. Whenever you like; I'm always at home."

She shivered in the breeze from the garden and closed the door.

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II

When he arrived home Simon Lachaume found two express letters. The first was from the Editor-in-Chief of *L'Echo du Matin* and read as follows:

"Sir,

"Professor Lartois has given us your name as the person best qualified to describe for our readers the last moments of our eminent contributor, M. Jean de La Monnerie. I should be most grateful if you could let us have an article of 150 lines by midnight at the latest. I hope that you will accept a fee of 200 francs."

The other was from Professor Lartois himself:

"Dear Sir,

"*L'Echo du Matin*, whose proprietor, the Baron Noël Schoudler, is both one of my personal friends and the father-in-law, as you know, of the daughter of Jean de La Monnerie, has urgently asked me for an article on the death of our great friend. Fearing that an article from myself might have unfortunate professional repercussions, it occurs to me that you, as a man of letters and a talented one, are infinitely more capable of writing it than myself. I feel sure that your youthful memory will have recorded with greater fidelity than my own the poet's last words, which so moved us. I have therefore taken the liberty of mentioning your name and, moreover, believe that it cannot but be of advantage to you, etc. . . ."

On reading these two letters, Simon was filled with pride. Clearly, the conversation that he had had with Lartois two days earlier had not been merely one of politeness. The famous doctor thought him worthily capable of writing so important an article . . . "as a man of letters and a talented one . . ." Since Simon had as yet published nothing, and to all intents and purposes written nothing except his thesis and some university essays, the gratuitous phrase delighted him.

The presentiment he had had the other night of being on the verge of some new chapter in his life had received immediate confirmation. One of the three greatest daily papers was asking for a contribution. The article would make him known. He had its title already.

He ate his dinner as quickly as he could.

"Make me some coffee," he said to his wife.

He sat down to work. In the first place he set himself to make the laborious calculation of counting, line by line, how many pages of manuscript a hundred and fifty lines of the newspaper represented. Six pages. He wrote the admirable title he had thought of at the top of the page: WHAT DEATH CAN TEACH US. Then he stopped short.

He sat there for half an hour, staring at the blank paper, chewing his

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pipe, refilling it, wiping his glasses with his thumbs. Nothing came; words escaped him. He was incapable of formulating a single idea. His thought was bogged in quicksands. Death... teach... What could it teach? What was death? Go back to the etymology of the word "poet." To make, to create. The creation of death. It was a contradiction in terms. Oh, the thick opacity of words, their resemblance to odd, detached, useless little stones, when one began to think before using them! Why should one begin by defining poetry before reporting a man's death? And yet Simon had the feeling that no one would understand his article if he did not first define the term.

And once again, the article he had composed in his head the other night, walking across Paris, refused to be recaptured.

His watch already showed half-past nine.

He began walking nervously up and down the two little rooms of which the flat consisted.

"I can only hope that when your La Monnerie's buried," said Simon's wife, "we shall be able to have a little peace and quiet again. What with your dead old man, you're getting neurasthenic."

"Yvonne," shouted Simon, "if you say another word, I shall go straight downstairs and telephone the newspaper that I won't write the article. And it'll be your fault. If you want to know why I can't write, it's because of you sitting there behind me. Your personality kills all enthusiasm, all thought, everything."

Yvonne Lachaume looked at her husband contemptuously out of the corner of her eye, and set herself to make button-holes in a pink silk blouse.

Having found some relief in anger, Simon went back to his desk, began the article, tore up several pages, and began again. Wherever his thought became confused, he replaced the general by the anecdotal. "To the eminent medical practitioner who was attending him..." he wrote, and then quoted the phrase: "Present yourself for election to my seat in the Academy."

"At least," thought Simon, "it'll please Professor Lartois."

He was quite right. A more sophisticated, or perhaps simply a more modest young man than Simon would have understood at once what was expected of him.

At ten minutes after midnight Simon entered the editorial offices of the newspaper, somewhat nervous that he might be too late.

The six pages he had written seemed to him a betrayal of Jean de La Monnerie, a betrayal of himself, a tissue of concessions, an avowal of impotence. He thought that he had never written anything so bad, and was even prepared for the humiliation of seeing his manuscript rejected.

"God, I shall never forget my first article!" he thought.

His whole future seemed to be in the balance.

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III

In his curiously long, tobacco-stained, clutching fingers, Lucien Maublanc held the large double, black-edged sheet with its copperplate type.

He read it slowly and attentively; he studied the announcement, savouring it: "the Marquis Fauvel de La Monnerie, Honorary Colonel, Chevalier of the Sovereign Order of Malta, Chevalier of the Legion of Honour, Medal of 1870-1871; the Comte Gérard Fauvel de La Monnerie, Minister Plenipotentiary, Officer of the Legion of Honour, Companion of St Michael and St George, Chevalier of the Order of Leopold, Chevalier of the Order of St Anne of Russia; Brigadier-General Comte Robert Fauvel de La Monnerie, Commander of the Legion of Honour, Croix de Guerre, Commander of the Black Star of Benin, Commander of Nischan-Iftikhar; Monsieur Lucien Maublanc—his brothers . . ."

Having read his own name, he stopped and laughed to himself. Lucien Maublanc, just that. He had no title, no *particule*, no decorations; he was not a Chevalier of anything at all. Nevertheless, they jolly well had to include him. He was a brother, wasn't he? Or, to be precise, a half-brother. For fifty-seven years he had been the permanent thorn in the family's side, the wound in its Achilles heel. He laughed again, hugging himself with pleasure. How right his mother had been to re-marry that Monsieur Maublanc whom he had never known, who had lived just long enough to do his duty and bequeath his son his huge blue eyes and his enormous fortune.

Lucien Maublanc could afford to scoff at the lot of them; he was so much richer than they were!

Stretching his legs towards the fireplace, he went on reading in the tall, thin print the catalogue of his cousins and relations by marriage. The last line but one read simply: "Madame Polant"; and the last: "Madame Amélie Lehère, Mademoiselle Louise Blondeau, Monsieur Paul Rénaudat, his faithful servants."

"She's managed to slip herself in again, the old hag," Lucien Maublanc thought.

It was at least the seventh funeral announcement in which old Mother Polant had appeared. She had succeeded in persuading the La Monneries that it was a family tradition to mention the servants, merely so as to get mentioned herself somewhere between the distant cousins and the staff. No one now thought of questioning the tradition she had originated and, at every death, Madame Polant sat regularly enthroned, all on her own, in the penultimate line.

"At least the old bitch won't appear in mine," the old bachelor said to himself. "Why shouldn't I revise it at once?"

He took from his Louis-Philippe desk a packet of black-edged cards,

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the invitations to his own funeral. There was nothing omitted but his age and the date of death. Even the church had been foreseen. And printed in small lettering was the following: "Flowers may be sent; he loved them so much."

The list of relations was even longer than in the La Monnerie announcement, for Lucien Maublanc had delighted in mingling with the Highnesses, the country gentlemen with sixteen quarterings, the Barons of the Empire and the various holders of Orders who represented his mother's family, a long string of unknown Maublancs and Leroy-Maublancs and Maublanc-Rougiers whose presence was bound to annoy their neighbours.

"The La Monneries give all their cousins to the eighteenth degree because it creates an effective impression; I shall include mine because it creates a bad one."

The envelopes even were already prepared.

Lucien Maublanc took up a pile of them and let them slip through his fingers as a card-player does the pack. Among the names of his relations and friends from club and society appeared others: "Monsieur Charles, waiter at the Café Napolitain, Mademoiselle Ninette, cloak-room attendant at the Tabarin, Monsieur Armando, hairdresser," and other similar persons from the purlieu of the theatre, the basements of restaurants and brothels.

"It'll be jolly funny," he thought, "to see the page-boys and waiters among the rest."

Suddenly his fingers stopped moving at "Mademoiselle Anny Féret, singer, 73 Rue Vavin."

"She made a fool of me, the little bitch," he murmured. He withdrew the envelope from the macabre pack and threw it in the waste-paper basket.

"And now to work!"

What Lucien Maublanc called "revising" consisted, whenever a member of his family died, in lightly crossing out the name of the deceased from the announcement of his own future demise. Every card already bore a number of these thin ruled lines which failed to conceal the print completely.

He counted the number of names crossed off.

With the new line he was about to draw through his half-brother's name, it came to nine. A splendid number; he would go to the club tonight and take a hand at the chemin-de-fer table that would pass nine times.

His revision took him a good hour. He drew his lines in a series of ten, let the ink dry, drank a mouthful of brandy, placed a cigarette between his large yellow teeth, and returned to work.

When he had finished, he went to his dressing-table, slipped three tiny little packets wrapped in tissue-paper into his waistcoat-pocket,

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felt their contents fondly, brushed his scanty hair, sprayed himself with scent, put a white scarf round his neck, and glanced at himself in the looking-glass.

Such as he was, with a skull that, fifty-seven years earlier, had been delivered with forceps and still bore the mark of the irons, with the two huge swellings above the temples, barely covered with white down, with his large, globulous blue eyes and their drooping lids, with his huge yellow teeth, he nevertheless preferred his appearance to all the La Monneries on earth with their showy good looks, their air of being porcelain herons. In the first place, he was richer than they were; and in the second, he was the youngest of them all. Could he detect in himself any sign of age whatever?

It was only when he left his house that he gave up the idea of going to the club that night.

"One does not go to the club on the eve of one's half-brother's funeral. It's not done. One goes somewhere where one can be quite certain of meeting no one one knows."

And he gave the taxi-driver the address of a gambling-house.

IV

Towards midnight he arrived at the Carnaval, chewing his cigarette, his bowler hat perched above the swellings on his brow. He was in an extremely bad temper. He allowed himself to be relieved of his coat without a gesture of thanks. All the greetings of the staff, "Good evening, Monsieur Maublanc, good evening Monsieur Lucien, good evening Monsieur Lulu . . ." remained unanswered. It was in vain that, as he entered the blue-lit room, the band-leader assumed an expression of pleasure, raised his bow to the other musicians and led them into a waltz. Silent, glacial, preceded by a servile head waiter, he crossed to his table.

He had just lost twenty-two thousand francs gambling; the price of a motor-car; all through the fault of his half-brother. The La Monneries, even when dead, retained their malign influence.

"It's a bad day, I can see that straight away," said Anny Féret, the club's singer.

Her figure was stout, her hair a gleaming black, her face made-up vulgarly, her eyebrows prolonged with a greasy pencil-stroke.

She was sitting at the nearest table to the orchestra with a little redhead of about twenty, slender of arm, sad and hungry of eye.

"All the same, we'll have a try," said Anny Féret. "I can't leave you penniless like this. But in the temper he's in, I can't guarantee anything. We must find out first whether he's waiting for anyone and then let him get a bit bored."

A bottle of champagne in an ice-bucket had been placed before

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Lucien Maublanc. Three waiters fussed about him just to extract one cork and fill a single glass.

"He looks too awful!" said the redhead when she had glanced at Maublanc.

Her thin shoulders quivered.

"Oh, my dear, you have to make up your mind what you want," replied Anny Féret. "In life, you know, men are never young, good-looking and rich as well. You'll find that out. Besides, it wouldn't be fair."

She uttered these last words in a sententious tone as if they were some great philosophical truth. She seemed lost in reflection.

"Anny," said the other in a low, plaintive voice.

"What is it?"

"I'm hungry. Could I have . . ."

"Of course, my dear. Why didn't you tell me you hadn't had any dinner. What do you want?"

"Some of those little sausages with mustard," murmured the redhead breathlessly, her eyes wide, almost filling with tears.

Anny Féret called a waiter, and told him to bring Frankfurter sausages. As he appeared to hesitate, the singer said: "All right, it's not on the house, I'll pay." And she added: "What beasts they can be here!"

A few minutes later the waiter returned with a steaming plateful. The little redhead at once picked up a sausage in her fingers, dipped it in the mustard, and bit off a large piece.

"Eat properly," the singer whispered. "He's looking this way. It's the third time. But pretend not to notice."

For a moment she gazed at the girl, who had now taken up her knife and fork and was concentrating silently on eating. A little warmth had come back to her thin, pointed, freckled face, to which two patches of rouge on the cheekbones gave an artificial flush.

The orchestra deafened them with an American tune.

"At bottom, you know, I'm a kind-hearted girl," went on Anny Féret. "To see a child like you without enough to eat worries me. You know you might really be quite pretty."

She got up.

"I think it's the moment to go across," she said. "You've taken in what I've said, haven't you? You won't make mistakes, will you?"

The younger girl, her mouth full, shook her shock of red hair.

"You'd better attend to your rouge," Anny recommended.

Making her long black satin dress flow about her strong thighs, she went across the floor on which a few couples were dancing.

"Hullo, Lulu, aren't you going to say good evening to me?" she cried, stopping at the table where Maublanc was sitting alone behind his ice-bucket.

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"I don't know you, Mademoiselle, I don't know what you want with me," he replied, staring vacantly past her down the room.

His voice was hoarse, slow, fat, and angry. He spoke out of the corner of his mouth and went on chewing his cigarette.

"Oh, Lulu, you're not going to bear me a grudge for what happened the other day!"

"You've trifled with me, Mademoiselle, I no longer know you. I thought you were a sensible girl, and now I find that you're like all the rest! Besides, I've decided to take no further interest in young ladies."

"Surely one may feel out of sorts without quarrelling over it," said the singer.

She was standing with her bosom leaning across the table, offering him the best possible view of the opening in the décolletage of her dress. The big blue eyes looked, then turned away with affected indifference.

"If you want to know, I even crossed you off the list of invitations to my funeral today. So there!" said Maublanc.

He looked up at her to see what effect this statement had produced. Anny Férét, who imagined heaven knows what relationship between the funeral invitation and the will, cried: "Oh, no, Lulu, you haven't done that to me! Do you really want to hurt me? It's not kind of you, you know; really it isn't kind of you at all! All the same, it doesn't make any difference! You'll outlive us all!"

The compliment appeared to have its effect.

"People who have treated me badly," he went on, grumbling, "are finished, finished, finished!"

His big eyes returned to her décolletage. The singer imperceptibly turned away to let him see that she wore no brassière.

"Come on," he said, indicating the seat beside him; "sit down and have a glass of champagne."

"Ah, now you're being nicer! I've got my Lulu back again."

She clasped him round the neck and left a gash of lipstick on his huge forehead.

"Take care, take care," he muttered; "you'll burn yourself. We'll be friends, eh, and nothing more..."

He stubbed out the half-smoked cigarette with the wet, chewed end and, placing another between his huge teeth, asked: "Who was the little girl you were with over there?"

"Over there? Oh, that's Sylvaine Dual, a very nice girl," the singer replied.

"Is that her real name?"

"No, it's her stage name. But she comes from a very good family, you know! Naturally her father didn't want her to go on the stage; so she ran away. What do you expect, she's like I was at her age: she's filled with the sacred fire."

And Anny began telling the moving story, the perpetually affecting

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story, of paternal anger, poverty endured with dignity, parts learned in a fireless room, and of the kind friend who knew what it meant, who had undergone it herself, and who did what she could to help.

"Touching, most touching," said Lucien Maublanc, nodding his head. "Has she got talent?"

"Yes, a lot. But of course she's only beginning. I can assure you she lives only for her art."

"Pretty, well brought up, talented, determined," Maublanc repeated. "You think she should be helped? Is she a good girl?"

Anny Féret was not the least embarrassed by his enquiring gaze.

"Oh, a very good girl, too much so even," she replied. "I don't know of her going with anyone. She's as chaste and shy as can be."

"Excellent, excellent," he said, "that's how it should be."

He signed to the waiter and sent him over to the table where the little Dual was sitting. After a brief colloquy, the waiter came back, saying that the lady had replied: "No!"

"There, what did I tell you?" Anny exclaimed triumphantly. "Look, I'll go and fetch her myself or she'll never come."

V

Without waiting for the result of the second attempt, the waiter put a fresh bottle in the ice-bucket.

The redhead arrived, distant, reserved, discreet. Sitting between Anny and Maublanc, she listened to the latter uttering a series of platitudinous remarks about the theatre; she sipped her champagne delicately. Soon she felt a starched cuff moving along her thigh and large fingers endeavouring to imprison her knee. She moved her leg away. Maublanc glanced at Anny to indicate his satisfaction and, advancing his hand once more, allowed it to rest on her dress.

"Oh, very, very thin," he said with a falsely paternal air. "You must eat, eat properly."

The girl gave him a wicked look which he took for one more sign of modesty.

"Excellent, excellent, that's just as it should be! Come on, have some more to drink."

His eyes were bright. Sitting with the two women, having drunk more than a bottle of champagne already, he was beginning to feel happy. People at the other tables looked at him from time to time through the heavy, smoky atmosphere and whispered to each other: "Look at the old rake over there." Lulu Maublanc accepted their glances as admiring, and looked thoroughly satisfied.

The violinist, having saluted him on his entry, now came up, bow held high, violin dangling from his fingers, a handkerchief at his neck.

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"Oh, an exquisite couple, an exquisite couple; admirable, admirable!" he cried in an ecstatic voice, describing in the air a circle about the faces of Lulu Maublanc and the little Dual with his bow.

He was an old Hungarian, bald and fat; a round stomach distended his evening waistcoat. Considering his corpulence, he was surprisingly active.

Lulu Maublanc chuckled. He knew this sort of buffoonery, yet it always created an illusion for him.

"Is there some special tune the lady would like to hear?" asked the violinist, bowing.

The little Dual, somewhat intimidated, did not know what to say.

"Well then, a Hungarian waltz, a very special one!" the violinist decided.

And he made a signal to the orchestra.

The lights were lowered and the hall of the Carnival was plunged into a shadowy midnight-blue. Only the figure of the fat Hungarian stood out in a cone of light from a spotlight, like a monster in the depths lit up from a porthole. His smooth hair, brushed back, lay low on his neck. The waiters had drawn a little nearer and were waiting in the shadows with an air of complicity. The occupiers of the other tables had instinctively fallen silent. They were all accessories.

After a first furious attack, the orchestra fell silent, leaving the Hungarian to play alone. He made his bow dance across the strings with a birdlike sound.

His whole attitude simulated inspiration; but his half-closed, pandering eye roved from Lulu to the redhead; his smile was that of a tired man who had once dreamed of being a great musician, who for forty years had scraped his violin with contemptuous, lucid servility before every kind of couple wealth could produce, who would presently go home to an attic and warm up some soup on a spirit-lamp, and now felt a mixture of paternal pity and vicious satisfaction in helping an old man seduce a child.

The little Dual whispered to Anny Féret: "I like the violinist."

Anny pinched her leg to make her shut up.

On her other side Lucien Maublanc was endeavouring to lean his deformed forehead on her angular shoulder, while lightly touching her flaming hair with his lips and whispering: "I'll take you to the gipsies, the real gipsies. Whatever you like..."

The lights were turned up again. There was some applause for the Hungarian who stood bowing, with creases across his paunch, until Maublanc had slipped a hundred-franc note into his pocket.

Little Dual felt hungry again.

Maublanc took her hand, kneaded it gently and said: "You see, little girl, one must make a good start in life. That's the essential thing. To make a good start. I made a bad one."

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His slight drunkenness was transformed into heavy sentimentality.

"Yes. I was married, yes indeed," he went on, "too young. To woman who . . . Shall I tell her, Anny?"

"Yes, of course you can. She's a good girl, but all the same she's no fool."

"Well, my wife was barren, yes. And she said that I was impotent. Our marriage was annulled. And it was Schoudler . . ."

Lulu's voice suddenly rose.

" . . . that disgusting Noël Schoudler," he went on, "who afterwards married her. And he, too, said I was impotent. I'm sure she had an operation."

"How malicious people can be, really," said Anny Féret in a sympathetic voice.

"Oh well, it marked me for life."

"You mustn't say that, Lulu," replied Anny. "In any case, I'm here to witness to the contrary."

He thanked her with a smile and said: "I like her very much, you know, your little friend."

Then he rose to his feet and said, with a sly smile: "I must go and wash my hands."

He had hardly gone before the waiter replaced the still half-full bottle, changed the ashtrays and relaid the cloth.

"Well?" asked Anny Féret.

"Oh, your Lulu disgusts me," replied little Dual with an air of distress. "I must say: he disgusts me."

"He used to disgust me too," said Anny. "He disgusts us all. But when you're hard up, what does it matter? At any rate, there's one advantage as far as he's concerned: he never goes higher than your knee, or very rarely."

The redhead looked at her suspiciously, as if she could not believe that the cuff on her thigh, the breathing in her hair, was only a show.

"How old is he?" she asked.

"Sixty, or a little less, but you must naturally tell him fifty."

"Is that really true?" cried the little Dual. "How very old doing nothing makes you! I should have thought . . ."

"Shut up!"

Maublanc was coming back, straighter, more cheerful, his eyes focusing better.

"Good, that's fixed then," he said to the girl as he sat down once more, "I'll take an interest in you, Sylvaine Dual. I'm going to start little Sylvaine Dual on her career. She has talent. She will be spoken about. You must give me your address. I shall come round and see you one of these mornings, as a friend."

Anny signed to Sylvaine that all was going well.

"Mary-Andge!" cried Miss Mabel. "If you aren't good, you won't go to your grandfather's funeral."

Marie-Ange quietened down immediately. It was not the moment to get oneself punished. For the first time in her life she was going to wear a black dress like a grown-up and, walking slowly, she would go in under the great awning, decorated with silver, that led to the porch. She had never been into the church when it had a big black awning outside it. Jean-Noël had stopped laughing too.

"Miss Mabel," he said, "pourquoi je ne vais pas à l'enterrement de grand-père, moi?" he asked.

"Say it in English," replied Miss Mabel who, whenever she foresaw a difficult argument, insisted the children should speak the other language.

"I want to go to Grandpa's . . ." said the little boy.

"No darling, you are not yet big enough."

"Mais j'ai presque cinq . . ."

"Say it in English."

"I'm nearly five," said Jean-Noël who was beginning to cry.

"Now don't cry. You'll go next time."

Jean-Noël continued to sob a little, merely for the principle of the thing, making a face at the same time. Then he changed his tactics. When Miss Mabel's back was turned, he extended his head in her direction, raising his lip to imitate his nurse's protruding teeth. He started playing again with his little pink toes, managed to put a quarter of his foot in his mouth, in the hope of making his sister laugh and preventing her going to the funeral.

But Marie-Ange, sitting upright in her nightdress, which was sprigged with little flowers, was dreaming of her black dress.

She was sadly disappointed when a white dress was brought in with a mauve sash, a white coat and a white hat. But she did not remark on it.

While Miss Mabel was dressing her, Jean-Noël began dancing round his sister shouting: "She isn't in black! She isn't in black!"

"So what?" said Marie-Ange acidly. "Mourning is just as good in white, isn't it, Miss Mabel?"

She had pretty green eyes, slanting up towards her temples, and she was already beginning to make play with them. She was a year and a half older than her brother, and from time to time was beginning to speak with a certain affectation. Jean-Noël had larger, rounder, dark blue eyes: *La Monnerie* eyes.

Otherwise they were very much alike.

Realizing that Marie-Ange, even though dressed in white, was going to the funeral all the same, Jean-Noël had a violent longing to spoil her dress, to tear it and stamp on her patent-leather, round-toed shoes; then, suddenly indifferent, he began playing with his bricks. He had

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these unexpected outbursts of temper, which invariably surprised his nurse and his parents.

At this moment François Schoudler came into the room. He was a fine-looking man of thirty, deep-chested and with smooth, brown hair. He was wearing a tail coat.

"Is Marie-Ange ready, Miss Mabel?" he asked.

"In one moment, Monsieur."

François looked lovingly at his two children, both of them fair, rosy, clean and handsome.

"My children are adorable," he thought. He played for a moment with their hair.

"I hope Monsieur will have fine weather," said Miss Mabel politely, showing her teeth.

The children were impressed by their father's clothes which were very unusual at this time of day; they were much intrigued by his coat-tails.

"Papa, is Mama coming?" said Marie-Ange, who was wondering if her mother was in evening dress with a veil.

"Your Mama has already gone to the Rue de Lübeck; we shall go together, darling," François replied.

He lifted up Jean-Noël to give him a kiss; the child whispered in his ear: "Papa, I want to go to the funeral. I was very fond of Grandpa, you know."

François, who had only heard the end of the sentence, replied as he put the child down again: "I'm sure you were. You must cherish the memory of your grandfather."

"Where will he be in the church, Grandpa I mean?" Jean-Noël asked. "You'll tell me all about it, won't you?"

"Yes, yes, but you must be good."

Jean-Noël went up to his sister whose gloves were being eased on to her fingers, stood on tiptoe to reach her face, three inches higher than his own, and, putting his wet lips to her cheek, said softly: "You're beautiful, you know, Marie-Ange."

With his pyjama-legs pushed half-way up his calf, he watched his sister leave the room followed by his father; there were big tears in his eyes.

VII

When he unfolded *L'Echo du Matin*, Simon Lachaume had a shock: he could not find his article. There was a big cartoon by Forain, with a dry, bitter, nervous line, which represented the poet on his deathbed and took up three columns. There was a headline: "The Government will be represented at the funeral of Jean de La Monnerie, which takes place this morning." And then, beneath Forain's cartoon, Simon read: "An account of the Last Moments." His eye moved down to the bottom

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of the page; he felt a pleasurable warmth at the heart: there was his signature: in black type, three times larger than the print of the text.

The title had been changed, that was all. Standing on the pavement of the Rue Soufflot, among the housewives with their shopping-bags, and students passing with satchels hanging down their backs, he re-read his article from beginning to end. Seeing it in print, divided into a number of paragraphs with the quotations in italics, it seemed to him much better than it had done the night before. It was balanced and rounded; anything more he might have said would merely have overloaded it.

"All the same, it's an odd thing to do," he thought, "to change the title without consulting the author; still, it may well have a more popular appeal."

A few yards off, he saw a little old man with a beard, who looked like a retired clerk; he, too, had stopped and, a copy of *L'Écho du Matin* in his hand, was reading Simon's article. Simon wanted to run up to him and shout: "That's me! I'm Simon Lachaume!" . . . I wonder what he thinks I'm like? A successful journalist?

He walked close by the little clerk so as, almost, to touch his first reader.

When the pupils of the fourth grade, lining the passage of the Middle School at the Lycée of Louis-le-Grand, saw Simon Lachaume coming, they nudged each other, whispering, "Look, have you seen the Prof.? What's come over him?"

And indeed Simon, walking slowly towards them in company with M. Martin, Professor of History and Geography, was dressed in an unusual way. He was wearing a black coat, too tight for him, and a large new bowler hat. Far from being at his ease, aware that he was the cynosure of his pupils' eyes, his manner was somewhat forced and he took care not to turn his head either to right or left.

The bell rang; the children went into the schoolroom. Having hung his coat and smart new hat on the hat-stand, Simon had the French essays collected from the class. Exercise-books lay open on the desks; but before giving out a new subject, Simon Lachaume said: "You have no doubt read in your parents' newspapers that Jean de La Monnerie is dead."

He stopped for a moment, as if he were expecting one of his pupils to say: "Oh, yes, Monsieur. I even read your article this morning." And for once he would have accepted the interruption. But no one said anything at all.

"His funeral takes place today," he went on. "I have to attend. You will therefore be free at ten o'clock."

A murmur of satisfaction ran round the benches. Simon tapped the desk with his fingers.

"Jean de la Monnerie," he went on, "will remain one of the greatest

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French writers of this age, perhaps *the* greatest. I had the privilege of knowing him well. In recent times I saw him nearly every week; I look on him to some extent as my master and I was at his bedside on Saturday when he died." •

He suddenly realized that he was much moved and automatically rubbed his glasses with his thumbs.

The boys maintained absolute silence. They had never imagined that their master could have such an illustrious friend, one whose name was found in the index to literary text-books and whose loss was greeted by the press as an occasion for national mourning.

"And this morning I intend to talk to you of him and the work he has left behind him, as should always be done in every class when a great man dies. Jean de La Monnerie was born in the Cher, near Vierzon, in 1846 . . ."

He spoke for longer than he had intended, improvising a lesson outside the syllabus. The boys listened quietly.

Nevertheless, after a moment or two, though the class was still quiet, Simon felt that he no longer had their attention, that their listening was a pure formality. The boarders in their grey blouses, the day-boys in their too-short coat-sleeves, these seven rows of unruly hair, these ranks of unlined, immature faces, which had attained only two-thirds of their adult growth, all these boys, still at an ungrateful age, but possessing already a complex, conscious inner life, systematized thought, individual tastes, dislikes, aptitudes, and desires—his whole audience, indeed, was in a state of absence, of non-presence.

The eyes that stared down at ink-stained, nail-bitten fingers were sightless. The voice emanating from the dais was not reaching those pink and white ears. The phrases, the dates Simon quoted failed to impinge on his pupils. To their newly acquired knowledge, already congealed like a sauce that has been poured out, dates such as 1848 or 1870 fell immediately into place. But 1846 or 1876, those distant, marginal dates, evoked nothing in their minds, unless perhaps it was astonishment that people were still dying who had been born so long ago.

And they watched the clock, careful not to interrupt this idle, passing hour that was to be followed by another of unexpected freedom.

One young fool was mechanically taking notes, but he too heard nothing.

Two pupils only, sitting on different benches, were listening with passionate, avid concentration. Their eyes seemed suddenly adult in their immature faces. As he went on speaking, Simon no longer looked at any but these two boys. He was certain that in a moment or two they would hurry to the bookshop in the Rue Racine and buy the *Selected Poems* of Jean de La Monnerie in the Fasquelle edition. The poems they were already writing, or would write next year, would be

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influenced by them. Whether they became bankers, lawyers or doctors, their whole lives would be changed thereby.

Half a century hence these two boys would say: "I was in Lachaume's class the day of La Monnerie's funeral."

Simon repeated to himself: "I was in Lachaume's class..." He looked at his watch. It was five minutes to ten.

"Take down the subject for next Wednesday," he said, resuming his dictation voice. "Write: 'What thoughts are suggested to you by the two first stanzas of the following poem of Jean de La Monnerie: "*Un oiseau sur le lac tombait avec les feuilles...*" Compare these lines with other poems you know that have been inspired by a feeling for nature'."

While the boys were closing their satchels and going out, Simon Lachaume wrote rapidly in his notebook. "For the preface, the post-humous works of J. de L. M. Great soldiers apart, the fame of great men does not affect the populace as much as is commonly supposed. It is only transmitted to one or two people at a time, to a few individuals in each generation, who know the reasons for that particular fame and, by dint of repeating a name, maintain its place in the collective memory."

Outside in the passage the children were rushing towards the porter's lodge, shouting: "Why can't someone like that die every week?"

Impervious to the hubbub, brushing his new hat on his sleeve, Simon remained lost in thought.

VIII

Little Dual was suddenly awakened by a knock on her door. She got discontentedly out of bed and went to open it.

"Oh, it's you already, is it?" she cried. "You don't lose much time, do you?"

Lulu Maublanc stood before her, walking-stick in hand, breathless from having climbed four storeys even at a snail's pace.

"I've come as a friend," he said, "as I promised. Aren't you pleased?"

"Yes, yes, of course," she replied at once, recovering her self-possession.

She made him come in. Her face was crumpled, her eyes still swollen with sleep, her thoughts in confusion. She was shivering.

"Get back to bed," he said, "you'll catch cold."

She threw a shawl about her shoulders and went to the looking-glass to comb her hair. Lulu stared at her creased nightdress, torn under the arms, at her narrow buttocks moving lightly beneath the stuff, at her bare ankles.

He watched to see her thighs as she got back into bed, but he was disappointed, for she kept her knees tightly together and her nightdress pulled down over her legs.

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"Goodbye, Lulu," she said.

She heard his footsteps going down the stairs and then, from below, the slamming of the taxi-door. The cobbler was still hammering at his nails. She jumped out of bed, ran out on to the landing and called over the banisters: "Madame Minet! Madame Minet!"

"What's up?" cried the landlady from the shadows below.

"Come up, I've got something to give you."

When the landlady had come upstairs, she said, handing her the note: "Madame Minet, would you be kind enough to give me some change, and buy some powdered chocolate, half a pound of butter, and then go to the coal-merchant's . . ."

The testy old woman, who had seen Lulu leave, gave her an odd look in which popular contempt for vice was mingled with respect for money.

"I shall have to take two hundred francs for rent," she said, "and sixty-seven francs that you owe me . . ."

"Yes, of course . . ." said little Dual sadly.

And, as the landlady went downstairs again, she thought: "Perhaps he'll come back tomorrow."

IX

So many candles had been lit that the light of day was denied entrance at the windows. Night reigned in the interior of the church of Saint-Honoré d'Eylau, a night glowing with a thousand flames and points of golden light, as if some portion of the firmament had been imprisoned beneath the vaulted arches. The great organ was filling the nocturnal space with reverberating sound, rolling out above the serried crowd in an approximation to the voice of God.

The whole tribe was there, the tribe of the 7th, 8th, 16th and 17th *arrondissements*, the tribe from the upper-class residential districts. Crowded into the transepts, packed into the side-chapels, the congregation was standing, crushed together, as far down as the main door, unable to find room for their elbows, and craning their necks to catch sight of some part of the performance.

The performance consisted of the old and illustrious, sitting in serried ranks on each side of the aisle in the great nave. To preserve precedence, placards had been placed on wooden stands saying: "Academy, Parliament, Diplomatic Corps, University . . ."

Madame Polant, routed by the official importance of the ceremony, had been constrained to delegate her powers to the grave personages who specialized in these things. All the arrangements had been made in accordance with protocol. The delegates from the Académie Française in their green uniforms, with Henri de Régnier at their head, clanked their sword-scabhards on the flagstones every time they moved. People pointed out to each other a white-moustached figure among the

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Academicians, his carriage still upright, wearing a uniform of horizon-blue, and whispered to each other: "It's Foch."

There were other uniforms, covered with a multitude of stars, which relieved the sombreness of the crowd. The politicians, bearded, chubby, bald, dishevelled, weak, violent, looked exactly like their caricatures in the daily papers. Some of these champions of democracy carefully raised their coat-tails before sitting down. Among the rows reserved for the diplomats were to be seen, above fur collars, the olive faces of foreign princes, and long Nordic faces, their eyebrows level and firm. The University and the Law, heavily bespectacled, stood out in their ermine-lined gowns of yellow or black against the purple. Novelists, catching sight of each other, nodded greetings across the aisle. Among the illustrious who had no official standing, Noël Schoudler, huge, massive and impatient, stood with his piratical beard rising above the crowd's heads. It was as if the devil had been inadvertently invited. He was one of the most powerful men in Paris and everyone noticed him.

The choir was full of prelates, noble, somnolent, or merely gossiping. There, too, were the obese Vicomte de Doué-Douchy, representing the Duc d'Orléans, and an old man with silken hair, representing the Empress Eugénie; they sat side by side and did not speak.

Of those present, at least twenty were destined to equally sumptuous funerals. And they knew it. Some of them had but a few months to wait.

But their fate seemed vague, distant, problematical. They rose, sat down, bowed their lined foreheads; they were alive and playing their parts before the tribe. They looked round, wondering who would pay for the next of these ceremonies. Though the fear of death was always with them, no one believed that it could be him.

As for the women, most of them represented at least half a dozen sins. The wives of power, finance, fashion, high-journalism, and luxurious idleness were assembled, ingeniously hatted; and with them were the great ladies of the theatre. Anna de Noailles, as celebrated as the men and dressed in an intricate arrangement of scarves and furs, was suffering greatly from the fact that she could not talk. The Cassini, tall, tragic, with a length of veiling about her neck, was trying very hard to show that this day's mourning was also hers.

The undertaker's agent, gloved in black cotton, who was superintending the registering of signatures at the door, had before him the most impressive collection of contemporary autographs.

Sitting in the first rows, in front of the illustrious mourners, was the family. First came the brothers: the General, whose uniform was one of the blue splashes visible from afar, and then the other two, Urbain and Gérard, their grave faces balanced on cylinders of starched linen. Lulu Maublanc arrived late and disturbed everyone finding his place.

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Gérard de La Monnerie, the diplomat, who had come especially from Rome and was so frighteningly thin that he might himself have been the corpse, said to Lulu in a low voice: "You might at least have had the decency to put on a tail-coat!"

"Oh, let him be, he's never known how to behave," said the General.

"I had a business meeting," muttered Lulu.

Madame de La Monnerie, dry-eyed behind her curtain of black crêpe, led, indeed dominated, the cohort of women, and from time to time put her fingers to her ears as the organ rose to its more piercing notes.

Jacqueline and Isabelle were playing the pious role that became their youth; they remained practically the whole time on their knees, their faces in their hands. And, finally, among this crowd of veiled women, Marie-Ange, in white, kept appearing like a daisy among ant-heaps.

And there, separated from the tribe by the halberds of the two plumed Swiss guards, alone above the stacked pyramid of flowers, the luminous rectangle of the surrounding candles and the heads of the standing men, was the huge catafalque, draped in black-and-silver cloth, containing the body of the dead man.

But no one's thoughts were of him, not even the deacons', not even the officiating Dominican Father's, not even Isabelle's. She was thinking that his room must be disinfected and that the huge pile of letters of sympathy must be answered.

Everyone in that assembly was too important, or believed himself to be so, to care for anyone else, or to think about anything but himself.

As for the spectators at the back of the church, they were beginning to be tired of standing and were no longer thinking of anything at all.

The two Swiss guards tapped the flagstones with the staves of their halberds.

Then, with a scraping of chairs and a sound of falling walking-sticks, with a clearing of throats, with stooping backs and discreet handshakes, the congregation began to move, dragging its feet, to go and shake a little holy water on the folds of the black cloth. The heavy silver sprinkler, weighing too much for many an elderly hand, passed from Government to Academy, from Academy to Faculty, from Faculty to Diplomatic Corps, from Diplomatic Corps to women who had once slept with the corpse and now felt a pang at the heart, to mistresses of Letters, of Science, of Art, and then, finally it passed to Simon Lachaume. Simon noted their faces, stored them in his memory, and was proud to have a reason for being among so many important old men. Great men can be seen closest at funerals. The file of mourners took nearly an hour to pass before the catafalque and the family.

Then the double doors were opened and everyone was surprised to see the daylight outside. A crowd had gathered on both sides of the doorway.

The dead man was taken from the catafalque. Carried by eight bearers who walked with slow and measured tread, the coffin, under its sword and cocked hat, moved down the central aisle, breast-high between the living. Simon supposed that the old poet's Academician's uniform had been taken off him, and that he now lay in the darkness of the lead coffin wearing a starched shirt, long white drawers and black silk socks.

At the funerals of the poor, when only a few relations follow the hearse, the corpse seems to ask for pity on its last journey. Here, on the other hand, the dead man seemed to wish to rebuff all homage. He passed contemptuously between two ranks of fame, lying beneath his plumed hat, a gaunt corpse that had lived too long to leave behind it a genuine sorrow.

The organ rang out for the last time, then with a clatter of swords a squadron of the Republican Guard, wearing their helmets with horsetail plumes, saluted with a great flash of light the star of the Grand Cordon of the Legion of Honour that was borne behind the coffin on a velvet cushion. The horses pawed the cobbles.

The colossal statue of Victor Hugo, standing high in the centre of the square, involuntarily turned its back on the proceedings. Forty years earlier, the statue and the corpse had sat familiarly together, and now the bronze cheered today's coffin on its way.

The Master of Ceremonies respectfully approached Urbain de la Monnerie, who was responsible for the arrangements, and whispered a few words in his ear. The Marquis crossed the pavement to thank the officer in command of the detachment of the Republican Guard, and the crowd fell silent, moved suddenly by the sight of the old man, with his crêpe-covered top-hat in his hand, his crown of white hair, his waisted coat and patent-leather shoes, the old-fashioned elegance of his walk and the exquisite courtesy of his manner. Somewhat hampered by his reins and sword-knot, the officer, leaning over his horse's withers, received the handshake as if it were that of a sovereign.

An Academician, a pot-bellied historian with a fan-shaped beard, was saying to Professor Lartois, who was listening attentively: "These La Monnerie brothers are astonishing people. They succeed in everything, even in their funerals. Look at them: one a General, the other a Minister Plenipotentiary. And under the Republic at that! Had they been born under the monarchy, and done as well as they have, they would have been one of those unknown families that suddenly emerge in the course of a single reign and rise to dukedoms."

A gust of wind swept across the square, raising a hard, cold dust, tearing at overcoats, clutching at the pot-bellied Academician's beard. He suddenly gave vent to a burst of temper against the employees of Messrs Borniol who had mislaid his cloak and would be the cause of his catching his death of cold.

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"I will see about it, cher Maître," said the celebrated physician, as attentive as a young man.

"Thanks, yes! But I've no doubt these undertakers know you pretty well, don't they?" cried the Academician, delighted by his own wit.

The coffin had been hoisted into the plume-covered hearse, sombre as a Spanish state-coach; the huge wreaths were loaded on while the six black horses winked behind their blinkers.

Those obliged to go to the cemetery sought their motor-cars or the great leather-hooded brakes waiting in a rank in the Rue Mesnil.

Madame Éterlin went by, supported by her maid, and looking like a hundred-year-old Ophelia.

A sparse crowd, lining the pavements of the Avenue Victor Hugo, watched the procession set off.

A few minutes later no one was left in front of Saint-Honoré d'Eylau but a few old poets, tall, thin, surprisingly elegant, each resembling Jean de La Monnerie as a bad copy does a great picture. They alone had still some interest in decrying the merits of the deceased: but in general they spoke of their own individual talents and the opportunities provided by free verse.

The undertaker's men, having erected their ladders, were beginning to take down the hangings.

x

The Minister of National Education and Fine Arts, Anatole Rousseau, a short man, who tossed back a long silver lock of hair, and punctuated each phrase with a movement of his small square hand, was finishing his speech.

"And he said . . ." he declaimed, and then paused, ". . . with his last breath . . ." he paused again, ". . . 'I shall not have time to finish it'. An admirable phrase . . . which at once sums up a life . . . and a destiny . . . and that anxiety, implicit in our race, to finish a task that has once been begun . . ."

The Minister consulted the visiting-card on which he had written his notes and raised his chin towards the extra audience beyond the cemetery walls.

" . . . And so I turn my eyes . . . to our country's ardent youth, to the rising generation, to the mysterious incidence of talent . . ."

Simon Lachaume discovered here the same theme he had developed towards the end of his article but put in other words and turned in a different way. It was certainly an obvious theme when one knew what the poet's last words had been. The Minister was also drawing the lesson of what death can teach us. But how had he come on that last phrase? And even asking himself the question made Simon's heart beat a little faster.

" . . . For when a man . . . devotes himself to a work . . . with all his

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strength and all his faith . . . he can never believe that his labour is finished."

There was a little burst of applause among the tombstones, sharp and absurd, like the sound of a paper bag bursting; it ceased suddenly as if ashamed of itself amid the silence and the cold. A young girl, a member of the family, was seized with a fit of the giggles; "schizophrenic" Lartois would have said, but it might fortunately pass for sobbing beneath the veil.

The Minister had given way to a lady from the Comédie Française who advanced so far forward that she almost fell into the vault; she recited, in a voice which suffered from her talent and her fear of catching a cold on the chest, *L'oiseau sur le lac*, of course, and *Souvenirs*.

And then, once again, the sprinkler passed from hand to hand, suspended above the open tomb.

The Cassini broke the sequence for several seconds. She fell on her knees, scraped up some earth with her bare hands and threw down a handful of gravel that rattled on the wooden coffin.

Professor Lartois, finding himself next to Simon in the throng, said: "Your article was excellent, my dear fellow. Subtle, extremely intelligent, exactly what was required; you're most talented. But then I always knew it."

And he introduced him to the Editor-in-Chief of *L'Echo du Matin*, who was just behind them.

"You must send us something else," the latter said to Simon. "And believe me, I wouldn't say that to everyone."

This was just before they arrived at the tomb and Simon had no time to bid his patron farewell.

The family, lined up like a row of cypresses, were receiving condolences.

Simon was fascinated by the General's cravat, though the old man did not recognize him, and by the diplomat's terrifying slenderness and eyeglass. He rubbed elbows with Noël Schoudler without suspecting that he was the proprietor of *L'Echo*. Nor did the giant realize that this bespectacled young man was a contributor to that day's front page.

Simon moved forward behind an old gentleman, who seized Madame de La Monnerie's hands, and said: "My poor, dear friend."

And Simon heard Madame de La Monnerie reply: "Yes. Twenty years too late."

As he reached her in turn, she repeated automatically, as if thanking him: "Twenty years too late."

Marie-Ange, at once solemn and ecstatic, her face mauve with cold, stood beside her anxious mother and said with the formal air of a grown-up to every overcoat that passed her: "Thank you very much. Thank you very much . . ." even when they omitted to stroke her cheek.

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When he had come to the end of the line, Simon uttered an "Ouf!" as did everyone else, and moved off. He met Madame Éterlin, who had not paid her respects to the family, but was discreetly withdrawing, still supported by her maid.

"Oh, Monsieur Lachaume," she said in her low, weak voice, "I was hoping to see you. Your article shattered me, utterly shattered me; so moving, so sensitive; and among all those wonderful things he said, he could still think of me. Lartois did not want me to come this morning; he feared for my health. But what can my health matter now?"

The Minister, Anatole Rousseau, who had been in the centre of the crowd all this time, now suddenly found himself alone and, strolling along a box border, seemed to be amusing himself deciphering the inscriptions on the gravestones. Simon hesitated; and then, his heart beating, made up his mind.

"Monsieur le Ministre," he said, "I had the honour of being presented to you last October at the Sorbonne during the ceremony in memory of the members of the University who died on active service . . . Simon Lachaume."

"Ah yes, yes," said the Minister, politely extending his small square hand: then his glance suddenly became more interested: "Lachaume . . . Lachaume . . . You write, don't you? Oh, but of course, you published that article this morning. Yes, I saw it. I liked it very much. That's right, it's you who knew La Monnerie so well. What are you doing now?"

As Simon was briefly replying, the Minister raised his stick towards the pediment of a monument and said: "It's unbelievable what bad taste they had in those days."

Then, like a man accustomed to wasting no time, he added: "Well, Monsieur Lachaume, what can I do for you?"

Simon wondered if it was a mistake to approach a Minister without having any precise business. But since Anatole Rousseau didn't seem to mind, they went on talking until they reached the cemetery gate. Simon noticed with pleasure that he was several inches taller than the Minister.

"I wonder where my secretary has got to," said the latter, looking about him.

Then, turning back to Lachaume, he said: "Have you no car? Where do you live? In the Quartier Latin? How lucky you are! I'm going your way. I've got to get back to the Ministry. I'll give you a lift."

✧ Sitting rather askew in the back of the big Delaunay-Belleville, Simon was uncertain whether to keep his hat on or not. In the end he took his bowler off as naturally as he could.

"Make yourself comfortable; here, put this over your knees, it's none too warm," said the Minister, dragging a big fur rug over their legs, as if they were going on a long journey.

Then the little hand, its joints thickened by age, proffered Simon a tortoiseshell cigarette-case with Turkish cigarettes in it.

Simon was sorry that the streets sped by so fast. He discovered that the Minister, Anatole Rousseau, whom a whole section of the press treated as an ignoramus, was not only an educated man, but also lively and energetic.

He could not help liking and feeling deferential to this short, compact man, with his silver hair fluffed out from under the brim of his top-hat, his birdlike eyes flickering to emphasize a phrase, and his face on which the years had left their mark as on the bole of a tree. Simon felt much as he had done in the presence of Jean de La Monnerie.

The Minister was perfectly aware of this and set himself out to please. He knew that the best way to achieve this was to speak from the heart. There is nothing so flattering as sincerity from a man in power.

"I wish I were you," said Anatole Rousseau, "and could meet poets, write articles, and have time to do it. In my early days I used to write too. I even published quite a lot of things in the reviews. I stopped all that, I don't dare say how many years ago. But I often long to take it up again. Each one of us, you know, has several destinies within him, and one never knows if life has led one to choose the right one."

"Unless we have only one destiny, which we must come back to in the end," said Simon.

"I don't think so," replied Rousseau. "I even believe that every man was meant to do something better than what he eventually does."

When the Delaunay-Belleville came to a stop in the courtyard of the Ministry, he said to the chauffeur: "Portois, take Monsieur Lachaume home, and then come back for me."

Then to Simon he said: "We must meet again. Let me see, what are you doing next Friday? I'm entertaining some Rumanian writers. It might interest you. Come along after dinner, at a quarter to ten, don't dress."

And he went up the stone staircase, pretending to hurry.

Alone in the Minister's motor-car, Simon hardly dared look out of the windows, so proud was he. With the tips of his fingers he stroked the fur rug that belonged to the master of the whole educational hierarchy.

He noticed several newspapers folded lengthwise on the seat; among them was *L'Echo du Matin*, and the end of Simon's article was marked with a great circle of red pencil.

"It's all because of that," he thought. "Besides, it's a very good article; certainly the best thing I've written."

And he wondered whether becoming famous in twenty-four hours, as La Monnerie had done with a single poem, was not more or less what was happening to himself.

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Simon did not yet know that personal worth and talent are necessary parts of good fortune though never completely sufficient in themselves, and that to raise himself among his equals a man needs some supplementary piece of luck: the word of a dying man uttered at the right moment, or perhaps an elderly minister on a cemetery path who has lost his secretary and likes company in his motor-car.

Simon did not dare have himself driven to his own wretched front door. He asked to be put down in the Place du Panthéon, as if he were going to the library of Saint-Geneviève. He went the rest of the way on foot. He walked on air.

He saw his wife on her way back from shopping, a loaf of bread in her hand. He joined her.

"A splendid morning," he said.

CHAPTER THREE

Isabelle's Marriage

PROFESSOR ÉMILE LARTOIS drew double curtains of shiny white cloth across the windows of his consulting-room. He liked working by electric light, for he could regulate its strength. The room had a disinfected, hospital smell and was a cool cube in the summer's heat.

"Well, my dear girl, what's the matter?" said Lartois. "Five weeks overdue? It may be nothing at all, you know. We'll examine you at once. Undress, please."

He washed his hands and dried them carefully while he went on talking.

"When did we last see each other?" he asked. "It must be six months at least. Yes; not since your uncle's death; that's rather more than six months. You heard what happened about my election to the Academy; it was most unfair. Really, quite disgraceful! My election was sure, certain, absolutely guaranteed. Yes, please take everything off. But, you see, eight days before the election, Daumières decided to put himself up and got all his friends to work for him. The *leit-motif* was: 'Poor Daumières is dying; we really must give him this last pleasure! Poor Daumières won't live till the summer; he's got cancer of the throat, he can't even make the usual calls.' And that's why they elected Daumières."

Lartois opened a little glass cupboard and selected a number of tinkling, nickel-plated instruments which he placed on a table.

"Well, the evening of the election," he went on in his slightly whistling, somewhat pretentious voice, "I had twenty Academicians here, all full of kind words. You know, they've all either got prostate or hardened arteries and I treat them for it, most of them for nothing. To listen to them, you'd have thought they would all have voted for me, but some did so at the first ballot and some at the second. 'Twelve votes at the first ballot is very good indeed, you know. If it were not for poor old Daumières! You'll see; next time you'll go through like a Marshal of France.' That's what they said. You can keep your stockings on, my dear. All this was nine weeks ago, and 'Poor Daumières' is as healthy as you or I. You must admit that the whole business was so disingenuous as to be almost a swindle! And I'm really beginning to wonder whether, after such a betrayal, I ought to stand again. Don't you agree?"

Lartois placed a bright steel band round his head and adjusted a lamp with a reflecting mirror on his forehead. The electric cord ran down his coat and trailed on the floor behind him.

"But of course, dear Professor, you must stand again!" Isabelle replied automatically.

Her eyes were dark and anxious. Her breasts hung rather low, her thighs were round and short, her navel deeply sunk in her shallow stomach. Her whole body looked rather embarrassed to find itself naked.

"Yes, that's what most of my friends advise me to do," said Lartois. "Well, let's have a look and see what's the matter."

He lit the lamp on his forehead and Isabelle could no longer see his face. He had become a creature from another world, from another universe, had become a strange little Cyclops disguised in a dark blue suit with black shoes, the first and second fingers of his left hand covered with rubber; his brain seemed to be hidden behind the monstrous Martian eye.

"You know, you've a very pretty body, my dear girl, very pretty," he said in his whistling voice.

Coming from behind his glaring face, the words did not sound real. The electric eye shone straight into Isabelle's, while a rubber finger raised one of her eyelids. Then two hands began to examine her chest, carefully, lengthily, rather too lengthily for Isabelle's taste. Her discomfort and anxiety increased together. Since the light had shone in her eyes, she could no longer focus them evenly. She was impatient to know the truth and wondered whether the whole act and its preliminaries were really necessary.

"Do your breasts hurt?" the reflector asked. "No? A little, I see. Yes, quite. Lie down here."

And the Martian indicated the examination couch. Isabelle found herself lying on her back in a humiliating position, her head bent

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backwards, her heels in steel stirrups, her thighs exposed and wide apart. She shrank from him and uttered a cry.

She promised money to every worthy cause she knew, as if charity could alter the diagnosis. The rubber fingers deeply explored her body, while the other hand, placed on her stomach, helped to reveal the presence and size of the embryonic life within.

At last the doctor stood up, switched off his lamp, and divesting himself of his robot trappings, became the familiar Lartois once more.

"Well, my dear girl . . ." he said.

Isabelle felt a great wave of relief. Could the doctor speak so calmly, move so unconcernedly, if what she so much feared . . . ?

Then she heard: "I must tell you that you are pregnant. You weren't quite certain, were you?"

Lartois added something more, but Isabelle lost it in the surge of her emotions. She was hardly conscious of her thighs as they regained the horizontal.

"I was certain of it," she murmured. "I knew it. It's too appalling."

"Yes, of course, of course, I understand; it's very tiresome," said Lartois; "but you're not the first it has happened to, you know; and it will happen to you again no doubt. In a way it's not such a bad thing. I used to look at you and say to myself, 'Poor little Isabelle's wasting her life; she's becoming an old maid.' Well, you've begun to live. So much the better."

She made no answer. She hardly heard him. She was still lying there helplessly. She no longer even felt his hands gently touching her.

"What's he like?" Lartois went on. "Is he someone from your own circle? Married?"

It was only the last question she answered—with a nod of the head.

"Well, of course, that doesn't make things any easier," he said. "But sometimes it's just as well. Who is he? Do I know him? It's not by any chance that young journalist who was there when your uncle died? I had a feeling . . ."

"God knows I never dreamt of this happening then!" Isabelle cried.

"Ah, so I guessed right! Why didn't you tell me at once? He's a very nice young man and remarkably intelligent. Don't worry; take it that I've already forgotten the whole thing," said Lartois.

He smiled.

"What am I to do? What's to become of me?" Isabelle moaned.

"My dear girl, the first thing is not to do anything silly!"

She thought he was referring to suicide, for it was the only possible way out that she could think of at the moment.

"If you want to do anything about it, do nothing for a month or six weeks—you've almost passed this period—and nothing after two and a half months. I'm warning you," said Lartois, speaking more incisively

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again. "I must also tell you that I don't really like to be mixed up in this sort of thing, so you'll understand. If it got talked about, the Academy would be closed to me for ever, apart from everything else. But I don't want you to be so silly as to fall into the wrong hands. Don't do anything at all without coming to see me again, eh?"

Only then did Isabelle burst into tears.

"What's the matter? What's the matter?" said Lartois. "Have I been too frank? But there are certain things that have to be said all the same!"

He took her face in his hands and kissed her forehead in a fatherly way.

"You'll see that in five years' time all this'll seem no more than a distant and quite ordinary episode in your life," he went on gently. "When something unpleasant happens, you must always consider how long it'll be before it no longer matters."

She was still crying and found it consoling to have him sitting beside her on the examination couch with an arm round her shoulders.

"At least I hope it was good?" he said confidentially. "Was it worth while? Was it a wonderful night?"

She began to realize that Lartois's fingers were following the same path that they had taken medically some moments before, and there was a hot, quick breath on her shoulder.

"No, really, what are you doing?" she muttered.

"You wouldn't care to try again?" he said in a strangled voice.

She wanted to cry out, but suddenly the doctor's mouth was already on hers; he had suddenly twisted round on to the examination couch and was now covering Isabelle with the whole length of his body.

"Doctor! What are you doing? Are you mad?" she cried, trying to fend him off.

She managed to get free and to jump off the couch. He did not pursue the farce, with her standing there, her stockings falling about her feet, while he lay fully dressed. He got to his feet, a little breathless.

The blood had mounted to his cheeks, and Isabelle was struck by the expression in his eyes. She recognized the curious, fixed look that she had noticed before at a dinner, where Lartois had begun to tell obscene stories almost openly in the presence of a young woman: two brilliant, little, empty lights, as inhuman as the electric eye he had just been wearing.

"What you have just done is unworthy of a man, Professor!" Isabelle said, dressing as quickly as she could.

"On the contrary, my dear girl, it's perfectly worthy of a man. And it would have been the best way of calming your nerves. Anyway, you're stronger than I thought."

He seemed perfectly at ease, and smoothed his greying hair with a well-cared-for hand.

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"I don't understand!" Isabelle went on. "I came to consult you. You've just told me the condition I'm in . . . You, a doctor!"

"How boring medicine is," he said with a cynical gesture.

"You think I'm too old, don't you?" he asked dryly.

"No, not at all. Well, really, I don't know. Can't you understand that?"

"Yes, I know, I know," he said in his whistling voice. "A doctor isn't a man; he's like a priest. I know it all! And then of course a man of my age isn't a man at all as far as you're concerned. You'll see, you'll see when you begin to grow old!"

It was he, it seemed, who was offended.

"Do you behave like that with all your patients?" Isabelle asked.

"Not with all of them," he answered gallantly. "With some of them. I must say that usually they accept favours more amiably. Anyway, don't let's talk of it any more. The doctor is still entirely at your service, my dear girl, to help you in your difficulty."

Isabelle was ready to go.

"Thank you all the same, Professor," she said, holding out her hand.

"Really, there's no need to thank me," Lartois replied. "You'll see, it'll all work out all right."

He pressed the bell. A nurse, with scarlet lips and fair hair showing under her cap, came in.

"Show Mademoiselle out," he said, "and come and tidy up, please."

He still had a disquieting gleam in his eye.

The nurse gave the faintest of smiles. She led Isabelle silently to the door of the flat, and then returned to the consulting-room, resigned and acquiescent.

II

The sun was setting as Madame de La Monnerie took her constitutional beside the lake at Bagnoles-de-l'Orne as she had done every day since the beginning of her cure. She wore a white tussore dress and a heavy black veil. A wide ribbon round her throat supported her sagging flesh, and a sunshade sheltered her hat.

Today, as every day, she was accompanied by an old gentleman dressed in a white flannel suit with a stiff, upright collar and a white tie. On his head he wore a hat of fine straw, now somewhat yellowed. The old gentleman with the beautiful manners was called Olivier Meignerais and was supposed to be a natural son of the Duc de Chartres.

The two strollers had very little to say to each other. Madame de La Monnerie had become deafer recently; and the old gentleman, who was shy by nature, blushed whenever she asked him sternly to say it again.

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"I think it will be fine again tomorrow," said Madame de La Monnerie.

"Yes, but I don't know what those little clouds mean," replied Olivier Meignerais, taking care to articulate clearly and pointing at the sky with his walking-stick.

They walked on in silence for several minutes. There was a gentle puff of wind rippling the surface of the lake. Madame de La Monnerie sneezed.

"Are you cold, my dear Juliette?" asked the old gentleman anxiously.

"Not at all, not at all! It's the pollen. The breeze has shaken the flowers in the flower-beds and I breathed the pollen."

When they reached the weeping willow that marked the limit of their daily constitutional, they turned about with one accord and without a word.

"There's a concert at the Casino tonight; do you want to go?" asked Olivier Meignerais.

He immediately blushed at the gaffe of suggesting such an outing to her when she was still in mourning.

Madame de La Monnerie hesitated a moment.

"Oh, just for once, let's forget the conventions," she replied. "A concert, after all . . . But, tell me, will there be any shrill instruments? They always hurt my ears."

"No, it's Chopin; that can't hurt you."

"Good, that's fixed then."

He accompanied her back to the door of the Hôtel des Thermes. He himself lived in a neighbouring hotel. Holding his stick and straw hat in his left hand, he kissed Madame de La Monnerie's black glove and said: "I shall come and pick you up at half-past eight."

Going to her room, Madame de La Monnerie found Isabelle waiting for her.

"Hullo, what are you doing here? Why didn't you let me know you were coming?" Madame de La Monnerie asked.

Isabelle was standing by the table on which were half a dozen small figures made of crumb of bread and dressed in *tutus* of gold paper.

"Yes," said the old lady, indicating her works of art, "I now work with toasting-bread. I find it much better. Well, why have you come here so suddenly? Have you got a room? No. You never think of anything. Where's your luggage?"

"My bag's downstairs in the hall," Isabelle replied. Her face was stained with sorrow and still showed signs of a night of tears.

"Aunt, I've got to talk to you," she went on.

"Yes, so I imagine. I'm listening!" said Madame de La Monnerie.

"Aunt, I'm pregnant," Isabelle said.

"What did you say? Speak up!"

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"I'm expecting a child!" said Isabelle, raising her voice.

Madame de La Monnerie looked down, glaring at her bread dancers, and pulled the long pins out of her hat.

"Anyway," she said, turning with a heavy shrug, "you can at least say that you're an expert at spoiling people's holidays! And who did you do it with? Come on, tell me, I've a right to know!"

"Simon Lachaume," replied Isabelle. "And I love him!" she added immediately as a gesture of defiance and defence.

Had she been perfectly sincere, Isabelle would have admitted that her love had become less violent since she had discovered her condition.

"Better and better!" cried Madame de La Monnerie. "A miserable little schoolmaster with a head like a pumpkin. The fellow's another present from your uncle! It happened through your spending your evenings sorting Jean's papers, of course! We would have done better to burn the lot."

"All the same," replied Isabelle, "the miserable little schoolmaster, as you call him, Aunt, is attached at this moment to a Minister's office!"

"What's that got to do with it? And in politics, too! Evidently a young man completely lacking in all scruple. Come in!" cried Madame de La Monnerie, interrupting herself in mid-flight.

"No one knocked," said Isabelle.

"Really? I thought they had. In any case, he's married, isn't he, so there's no question of anything coming of it as far as he's concerned? And that's all there is to it. How long's this affair been going on?"

Isabelle was pained to hear her first and belated love-affair thus condemned in the sort of words one applies to the love-affairs of others only. In a different way, it was as humiliating as lying on the examination couch.

"Three months," she replied.

"And you've been in this condition three months?"

"No. It must be six weeks."

"All is not lost yet. Who have you seen?"

"Lartois."

"Excellent! In that case all Paris will get to know of it."

"Oh, Aunt," cried Isabelle, "I'm sure of Lartois's professional discretion!"

Madame de La Monnerie shrugged her shoulders.

"Naturally, he won't go about saying: 'You know about the little d'Huisnes, don't you?' Not at all; only on the first possible occasion he'll come up to you in the middle of a drawing-room, having dined well, tap your cheek and say: 'Well? And that little trouble we were bothered about, we're not worried any more, are we? Everything all right?' And of course everyone will understand."

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"But what does it matter," Isabelle said wearily, "since there'll be a child in any case?"

"What's that? What was that you said?"

"I said," repeated Isabelle, "that it doesn't matter, because there'll be a child."

Madame de La Monnerie raised her great head capped by her coil of blue-tinted hair.

"Oh, so you've decided to have it?" she said.

"Yes, of course," said Isabelle, as if it were obvious.

"Oh, I hadn't realized that," said Madame de La Monnerie. "I thought you would be going back to Lartois one of these days. And what's more, I was prepared to interrupt my stay here and go back to Paris with you so as to . . . well, so that everything should be done as discreetly as possible. Of course I won't hide my disapproval from you; but in the situation you've got yourself into . . ."

Isabelle was astounded at the calm way the old lady accepted the possibility of an abortion, and spoke as inhumanly as the doctor had done the day before. The only thing that people of that age seemed to worry about was the convention of not calling things by their right names.

"Really, Aunt," she said, "do you mean to say that you, so devout, who never miss Mass on Sunday . . ."

"Oh, my dear child, you're not going to teach me how to be a Christian! Never once in all my life did I deceive a husband whom I detested and who constantly betrayed me over the years. Although I only had one daughter . . ."

The old lady interrupted herself once again to shout "Come in!" in an angry voice.

"But there's no one there, Aunt."

"Of course there is, someone knocked."

Isabelle went and opened the door: the passage was empty.

"Well, I thought there was someone there," said Madame de La Monnerie. "Where had I got to? Yes; although I only had one daughter after ten years of married life, it wasn't for want of trying. So I beg you not to draw comparisons between us."

She went to the window, drew open the thin curtains, and gazed out for a moment at the trees in the park.

"When one commits a first sin," she went on, turning back, "it leads to a whole series of others. You have had an affair with a man outside marriage. That was a first fault. The man is married; you therefore take part in adultery. Second fault. You lie to society, you lie to me, but don't let's talk of that. More faults. Each time you—don't let's mince our words!—slept with your gentleman friend, was it with the object of having a child? No! And what is the difference between refusing to have a child when one should and refusing to have it six

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weeks later? You will commit a sin the more; and it is the inevitable result of your other sins."

"What a monstrous idea! You know very well that it is not the same thing," said Isabelle. "Whatever happens, I shall keep my child."

"So, you prefer the scandal, do you?" cried Madame de La Monnerie. "You prefer making the whole family share your disgrace. You prefer to set a bad example? God hates scandal! . . . Come in! . . . If you don't know how to live up to your name, at least do not blacken it for those who share it with you."

Isabelle burst into tears and hid her face in her hands.

"But what am I to do?" she murmured through her tears.

She knew her aunt's violent obstinacy and foresaw several days of torture after which, defeated, she would go back to see Lartois.

"What do you expect? Every girl without money hasn't the luck to be barren!" she cried, raising her head in sudden anger. "You don't understand that I'm unhappy, you don't even suspect it. I knew, I knew very well that it would be like this. I'm interrupting your cure, that's all. Well, you may as well know that last night I spent an hour in the bathroom in the Rue de Lubeck, sitting in front of the gas tap. Last night I was right."

"What sort of tap? What for?" the old lady asked, inclining her ear with a wicked expression.

"To kill myself!" cried Isabelle, at the end of her tether.

"If you had, that would have been a crime, and you would only make the scandal worse. Families like ours don't kill themselves. We leave that to the bourgeois and the artists! If you're unhappy, it's quite natural. Besides, you're not completely responsible; your mother was mad. I don't ask for the death of the sinner. Since you're determined to keep the ridiculous child, well, we shall have to see. I shall have to think the matter over. One way out might be to go abroad. I suppose the child will have to be registered in the name of d'Huisnes?" added Madame de La Monnerie. "But that's impossible! You had better go and book a room and dress for dinner."

Isabelle went out.

"And this is the way she rewards me for all I've done for her," thought Madame de La Monnerie.

She remembered her meeting with Olivier Meignerais, and wrote him a note to put him off. "There you are," she said to herself. "When you're in mourning you don't go to the Casino. This is the result!"

She rang for the waiter and he had to knock three times before she heard him.

Olivier Meignerais went to the concert alone and spent an extremely dull evening.

III

In the new Ministry, Anatole Rousseau had moved from Education to the War Office: and, in reorganizing his staff, he had found room for Simon Lachaume.

Simon was not qualified to handle liaison with the Press and the Senate at the Rue Saint-Dominique. His military qualifications were those of a lieutenant in the Reserve of Infantry, who, in spite of his defective vision, had fought honourably in the war: his political knowledge, except for some vague general principles, was non-existent.

But, since their meeting in the cemetery, Simon had seen a good deal of Anatole Rousseau. The Minister had shown the young Bachelor of Arts the studies of Maine de Biran, Pascal, and Fourier, which he had published in reviews that had been defunct these last forty years.

"You should collect them together in a book, sir," Simon had said.

Anatole Rousseau had smiled and looked affectionately at Simon from under his bird-like eyelids. He was taken with Simon's huge head and the ambition behind his deferential manner.

"Here is one young man at least," thought the Minister, "who differs from the rest of his generation and doesn't think the world began turning on the day of his birth. With a little encouragement he'll go far."

Anatole Rousseau was growing old: there had been certain disaffections among his personal staff, and these had occurred at the very moment he was given the most important office of his career. He had found it necessary to make a last harvest of young men with a future, who owed everything to him, and were still young enough for their loyalty to have a chance of lasting out his time. Simon was part of this harvest.

On the day he had called Simon urgently to Louis-le-Grand to propose that he should enter his office, Anatole Rousseau had said: "I should be very happy to have you for one of my personal assistants. But you must think it over carefully, my dear Lachaume. I do not say that entering the Ministry will change the whole course of your life, but one never knows. You have come to a turning-point. Take care not to mistake your direction. You can only judge for yourself and, if you refuse, I shall most certainly never hold it against you."

The question of "mistaking his direction" seemed to be very much on the elderly Minister's mind: but, while he played the part of a man who regretted not having made a literary career for himself, he in fact lived only for the dramatic satisfactions of power.

Even as he spoke, he saw the signs of political temptation on his protégé's face.

Had Simon refused, Anatole Rousseau would undoubtedly have had

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a secret respect for him, but would never have seen him again. Simon accepted on the spot, without the slightest sign of hesitation. What had he to lose? Nothing, at least so he thought, and everything to gain. He saw the doors of opportunity opening wide before him.

His acceptance pleased the Minister, but with the somewhat dubious pleasure of an elderly gambler persuading a young man into a baccarat room, or of a drug-addict handing his first hypodermic to a neophyte.

Anatole Rousseau had made no mistake in his choice. Simon's big head contained a well-organized brain, a first-class intellectual machine, that could move quickly into gear on any problem, provided the material to work with were provided. His was one of those non-creative minds, which nevertheless can be turned to any purpose, and are better servants of ambition than is genius. 341/2486

Seconded by order of the Rector, in receipt of a salary from his new post over and above his usual emoluments, Simon found life easier. His thesis, which had appeared in the meantime, had been well reviewed and had brought him in a little money. He had immediately taken advantage of his new circumstances to leave the Rue Lhomond and take an *entresol* which, though scarcely bigger or better lit, looked more respectable and had a better address. He had moved from a district where poverty was blatant to one in which it no longer had the right to be visible. It was not generally known that he was married, as he never went out with his wife. 341/2486

That afternoon, Simon walked up and down the office he occupied in the Ministry, repeating to himself: "Isabelle is pregnant, Isabelle is pregnant. She has gone to Bagnoles. I have no news of her. Oh, why did I marry Yvonne when I came back from the war?" He gazed for some time at one of the bronze claw feet of his desk. "After all, it was for exactly the same reason. She thought she was pregnant. Life certainly repeats itself! One always manages to get oneself into the same situation all over again. Another sad-looking girl."

He had to admit that Isabelle and Yvonne resembled each other, physically as well as mentally: only, what had pleased him in Isabelle had been the social change, and the self-confidence this adventure had given him, while Yvonne's insipid, patient face became less bearable every day. 843. 912081 D 79c

"At the point I've now reached in my career, Simon Lachauve marrying Isabelle d'Huisnes would have been splendid! Why have I fastened this ball-and-chain to my leg? Anyway, from tomorrow, I shall have a divan bed put in the spare room."

At the same time, he was wondering which of his old student friends, now a doctor, he could go to if Isabelle came back from Bagnoles determined on an abortion.

"I mustn't make a mountain out of a molehill." (Simon looked once again at the scrolled bronze claw foot of his desk.) "It happens all the

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time among peasants, and the old women deal with it themselves. As for the Quartier Latin, it's a daily event there."

The non-commissioned officer on duty in the outer office came in and, saluting smartly, handed him the visiting card of the Marquis de La Monnerie, who desired an interview "on a personal matter."

Simon nervously wiped his glasses with his thumbs. What was the old man doing mixed up in this business? Had Madame de La Monnerie asked the eldest of her brothers-in-law to deal with the crisis? And why, in that case, had the Marquis put himself out instead of summoning Simon to him?

Simon suddenly had a vision of the whole imposing family rising in defence of their unprotected niece-by-marriage. If the poet had been alive, Simon could have explained things to him. Jean de La Monnerie was one of those men who understood. But as for the others, with their principles, their contempt, their magisterial air . . . Simon might well persuade himself that, after all, there was nothing they could do about it. Nevertheless, the prospect of the explanations he would have to make gave him a feeling of constriction in the stomach. He went over and closed the window, automatically tidied his desk, and prepared for the shock: with his lower-class background and lack of manners, he felt unequal to the situation.

Urbain de La Monnerie came in, austere and slightly stooping.

Simon immediately wondered what had changed in his looks. He still had the same high, stiff crown of hair on the back of his head, the same pendulous dewlaps under his chin, and the too-long lobes to his ears. But his glasses were new, the side-pieces of gold, and one of the eye-pieces plain and opaque to hide a recent operation for cataract. The other eye shone dourly, magnified by the lens. The magnified eye in conjunction with the wall-eye increased Simon's feeling of discomfort.

The old man sat down and placed his gloves on the end of the desk.

"Monsieur," he began, "I have come to see you concerning . . ."

His tone of voice was at once businesslike and hesitant; the interview was weighing on him. Simon, somewhat shaken, said in a low voice: "Yes, I know."

"Oh, you know all about it, do you?" said Urbain de La Monnerie. "That will make things easier."

Simon nodded his head, picked up a ruler and neatly replaced it.

"I must admit, Monsieur," went on the old man, "that I consider my young brother's treatment extremely unfair."

"Your . . . young brother?" Simon repeated in bewilderment, raising his head.

"Yes, my brother, General de La Monnerie. We are talking of the same man, are we not?"

"Yes, yes, of course," said Simon. And he immediately added: "I hope you won't mind, Monsieur, if I open a window?"

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"Not at all, on the contrary; it's always so hot in your offices! Of course, I perfectly understand that officers are placed on the retired list, but why, in the circumstances, when officers older than my young brother are retained on the active list, should he be specially singled out, when he has similar service qualifications?"

"I do not think that he has been singled out in any way," said Simon at random.

* He knew absolutely nothing about it. His thoughts were vague. He had a silly desire to laugh.

"I know very well what is held against him," went on Urbain de La Monnerie. "He sent in his papers at the time the Inventories of Church property were being drawn up, for which I can but applaud him; moreover, I would have done as much had I, at that time, still been in the Army. I do not know, Monsieur, what convictions you hold, but all that should have been wiped off the slate. The Republic behaved badly at that time; we, at least, have forgotten it! I thought I might approach you because of your connection with my brother Jean!"

"Life is really very strange," thought Simon. "Isabelle is pregnant by me, and he's a thousand miles from being aware of it. He's fussing about his own little problem. Madame de La Monnerie, who now knows the facts, is unaware that her brother-in-law is here at this moment asking me to do her other brother-in-law a favour. And Madame de La Monnerie and Isabelle are both ignorant of the fact that I'm going to dine with Madame Éterlin tomorrow. And Madame Éterlin doesn't know that her lover's niece . . . And I met Anatole Rousseau at Jean de La Monnerie's funeral . . ."

He felt that he was at the centre of a ball of string, and that he alone could see clearly through the tangle of threads, or perhaps at a telephone switchboard where the conversations crossed each other while each outside caller could hear but a single voice. He could hear them all and, through the hubbub, the strong voice of an old man defending the merits of his "young brother."

"He is a man," said Urbain de La Monnerie, "who can still render the greatest service. Age-limits mean nothing. They're absurd! There are men who are finished, used up, exhausted at fifty. There are others who are still as strong as the Pont-Neuf at eighty, and whose brains are as clear as those of many a whipper-snapper. My maternal grandfather, the Marquis de Mauglaives, died at the age of eighty-two after being thrown by his horse. And without wishing in any way to put myself forward as an example, I must tell you that I myself am seventy-eight. But there it is! One law for everybody. Sack the useful men and keep the duds!"

Polite and diplomatic on arrival, he had become heated in spite of himself. The skin of his skull turned purple; his one visible eye glowered behind its magnifying lens. He coughed and spat into his handkerchief.

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"After all, he was the fellow who won every equestrian event between '80 and '84," he went on. "Of course, you're too young to remember."

"I wasn't even born," thought Simon.

"He fought in three colonial campaigns under Galliéni and commanded a division during the whole of the 1918 offensive."

"That's it, that's it," Simon thought; "he's like an old gentleman getting angry on the telephone, shouting into the instrument, trying to make himself heard through the whole jumbled network."

"We're the sort of people who very much dislike saying things in their own favour," said Urbain de La Monnerie, regaining his calm. "But I've always taken a particular interest in my brother Robert's career. He was the youngest. When my father died, he was only four years old. I was almost nineteen. There, Monsieur, I've said what I came to say. I may tell you that I've come to Paris almost entirely so as to deal with the matter."

"You may count on me, Monsieur," said Simon, rising.

He was already automatically using the phrase "count on me," which is common among those who have even a little influence. He added: "I'll write the Minister a note on the subject or, better still, I'll speak to him directly; that would be more satisfactory."

The Marquis de La Monnerie picked up his gloves and hat, thanked the personal assistant and courteously excused himself for having taken up his time.

As he recrossed the antechambers of the Ministry with a firm step, he was thinking: "That young man seemed to listen attentively to what I had to say. I think he'll go far."

IV

Behind the Minister the huge, overwhelming portrait of Louvois reached to the ceiling.

Anatole Rousseau's legs were so short that he had to have a little tapestry-covered footstool in front of his chair to rest his feet on. His hands fluttered incessantly between the telephone, his diary, his engagement-book and the multifarious papers that were piled every day on his mahogany desk.

When Simon Lachaume mentioned General de La Monnerie, Anatole Rousseau cried: "What, what? Why do you want to fish up that old crab, my dear Lachaume?"

To a Minister of War all generals were *a priori* "old crabs."

Simon pointed out that Robert de La Monnerie was only sixty-four. Anatole Rousseau, who was sixty-six, threw his silver lock of hair back across his head and fluttered his eyelids a couple of times.

"It's always said that a soldier's life keeps you young," he said; "well, it's not true. It mummifies you. At fifty a soldier's finished. I can't

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say it out loud here, but I think it. They ought all to be put down at that age. They're all turned stupid by garrison life, tropical suns, falling off horses, and discipline. They look splendid, of course. But their grey matter has turned to granite. From time to time there's an exception: Gallieni, Foch. But they're strategists; that's different. And the proof of the matter is . . ."

Towards the end of the day Anatole Rousseau liked to relax for a few moments and philosophize about this and that, uttering facile sentences to some member of his staff, and particularly to Simon whom he regarded as the intellectual of his team. This gave him the impression of keeping in touch with trends of ideas.

"The fact is that no soldier," he went on, "has ever made a good Minister of War. Take Galliffet. Chaos. Consider the Lyautey experiment. What good was that? What keeps you young, you see, is power and political strife. In politics one's not fighting against rifles, but against men. You remember what Bergson says about true time and clock time? Well, soldiers live like their clocks . . . Give me the file on retirements."

Then, having looked at the papers, he said suddenly: "But, La Monnerie . . . La Monnerie . . . Tell me, didn't your La Monnerie have some trouble at the time of the Inventories?"

"Perhaps he did, sir; indeed I seem to remember . . ." replied Simon, who could not understand why, after a four-years war and a million and a half killed, people should still attach so much importance to this ancient chapter of contemporary history.

"Yes, and he was clearly an anti-Dreyfusard. Really, my dear Lachaume, do you want me to get into trouble with the Radicals? Take care; your friendships in the Faubourg Saint-Germain will ruin you. Are you in love in that quarter, that you're so determined to please them?"

Simon vaguely indicated a negative. The Minister watched him, smiling paternally.

"Well, we all start the same way!" he went on. "Of course, the little countesses! They introduce us to a lot of people with historic names who look at us as if we were some strange kind of animal. We are flattered. Then we suddenly begin to realize what a waste of time those people are! Even though they've always an air of spitting on the Republic, they've always something to ask of it."

He went on smiling at Simon's large, rather embarrassed head, at his own memories and at his experience of life. Then he suddenly became serious again.

"Oh, while I remember," he said, clicking his fingers, "about the luncheon with Schoudler the day after tomorrow, I'd prefer it to take place somewhere outside the Ministry. Book me a private room for five at Larue."

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"Schoudler's son married the daughter of Jean de La Monnerie, a niece of the General's," said Simon.

"You seem to feel very strongly about it!" cried the Minister. "Let's see, what is your old crab? A Brigadier? Perhaps we might console him by retiring him as a Major-General, provided it doesn't create too much trouble in the office!"

He wrote a rapid note and slipped it into the file.

"You'll go yourself, won't you, to the restaurant," he added, "and see that everything is properly laid on? You'll find them extremely obliging; so be exacting!"

And he turned back to more important matters.

V

To talk to Olivier Meignerais, Madame de La Monnerie had not wished to ask him to come to her room; that would hardly have been proper; and the hall of the hotel, with everyone passing to and fro, also seemed unsuitable. She had, therefore, decided to await the hour of their walk by the lake.

They walked for ten minutes without exchanging a word except the usual banalities. The old gentleman spoke discreetly of the excellence of the concert the night before, without daring to question Madame de La Monnerie's reasons for refusing to come. He reassured himself that she had not been ill.

Suddenly, in her abrupt way, she said: "Olivier, you've been in love with me for thirty years now, haven't you?"

The old gentleman came to a standstill and blushed to the roots of his hair.

"Yes," she went on, "you've even somewhat compromised me. Many people believe that you either have been, or still are, my lover."

"You know very well, my dear Juliette, that it has always been for you to decide . . ." replied Olivier Meignerais in a diffident voice.

"Yes, I know it well. And I admit that, if Jean had died twenty years earlier, many things might have been different."

They walked on for some twenty yards.

"Well, Olivier, I have a feeling you'll now be able to prove your affection for me," she went on.

He stopped once more and seized her hands.

"Juliette!" he cried.

He was breathless with emotion.

"No, my poor friend, there can be no question of that," replied Madame de La Monnerie. "Don't be silly! Come on, let's walk; don't let's make a spectacle of ourselves. Why should I marry again? And as for anything else, well, look at us."

"Yes indeed," said Olivier Meignerais with sad irony. "It's a bit

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late in the day. Anyway, what's happened? What do you need me for?"

"Well, it's like this! My niece has made a fool of herself. She's allowed herself to be seduced by a little adventurer. It's all the result of this wonderful modern education. And now, you see, she's pregnant! But don't keep on stopping like that! No, please, no sympathy! I know very well what to think of it. And the boy's married, of course. And the girl wants to keep the child."

"And I approve her for that," said Olivier.

"Yes. So do I. Her religious scruples do her honour, though they're somewhat late in the day. But I don't quite know whether you realize what it's going to mean. The scandal, the shame flaunted before all Paris. And in my declining years which already don't look very gay, I must confess . . . Besides, there's the little fool's own life to think of! What can she ever hope for after a thing of this kind!"

"My poor friend! What are you going to do?"

Madame de La Monnerie took a deep breath.

"Well, there it is, Olivier," she said, "I want to ask you to do me the service of marrying Isabelle."

"What?" cried the old gentleman.

This time he stood still for several seconds, took off his straw hat, and wiped his forehead which had turned scarlet again.

"It's the only solution that has a hope of solving everyone's problem," went on Madame de La Monnerie, "if you are generous enough to consent. And I believe you will consent, unless I'm mistaken in the quality of your feelings for me. After all, my dear friend, you'll not be making such a bad bargain. At our age we need looking after. The child has made a fool of herself, of course, but that doesn't mean that she's not an excellent housekeeper. And, when all's said and done, I daresay you'll find it quite diverting."

He made no answer. They had come to the weeping willow. He suggested sitting down, since his long legs were tired. He dusted the green bench with his handkerchief, indicated the shady end of it to Madame de La Monnerie, sat down with his hands hanging between his knees, and gazed at the lake. An old black swan swam by, proud as a galley.

"And what sort of figure would I cut at my age?" he said at last. "A young woman, and then a child at once. The whole trick would be too transparent."

"Perhaps, but the trick would at least be taken," replied Madame de La Monnerie.

"Have you spoken to Isabelle of this?"

"No."

"Do you think she would agree?" he asked.

"Oh, I can guarantee that!" cried Madame de La Monnerie. "If

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she didn't, it would be the last straw! Don't tap the bench with your stick. It makes a most disagreeable noise."

"But I'm not tapping it, Juliette."

"Oh, I thought . . ."

They fell silent for a moment. A few leaves fell from the willow on to the dark mirror of the lake.

"No, I won't," he said. "I'm an old bachelor; I should have to alter all my habits. One no longer can at our age. Oh, if it were you, it would be another matter."

"What did you say? Speak up!"

"I said, if it were a question of marrying you, *you*, I wouldn't hesitate for a second, and well you know it."

"And I, too, Olivier. I believe I'd have liked to end my days at your side," said Madame de La Monnerie. "Our great friendship, the feeling that a man still thinks of one, still takes pleasure in one . . ."

She spoke with some emotion.

"Well then, Juliette?" he asked slowly, turning to look at her. "Why don't we do it?"

"One seldom does what one wants. Indeed, I've generally had to do the opposite all my life," she replied. "Besides, you know, we'd look rather ridiculous too. At least let it serve some useful purpose, if it must be ridiculous!"

She was silent for a while, weighing her renunciation, then added: "Come on, old friend, do me this great service. Marry my niece."

He hesitated, breathing deeply.

"So be it," he said, "because I've loved you very much, Juliette."

Madame de La Monnerie placed her hand over Olivier's and squeezed it.

"I was sure of you. You're a wonderful man," she said.

Olivier raised her black glove to his lips. There were tears in his eyes.

"But first, Juliette," he said, "I must make you a confession."

"What on earth?" she asked.

"All the world believes that I'm a natural son of the Duc de Chartres. Well, my mother may perhaps indeed have known the Duc de Chartres, but only after my birth and . . ."

"Oh, really," interrupted Madame de La Monnerie, "please don't go on. I've got enough trouble on my hands. When a thing has been said for so long, it ends by becoming true. And, anyway, are you absolutely certain? You look so like the Orléans!"

"It's quite accidental," said Olivier with his melancholy irony. And he added: "Perhaps it'll also be said that Isabelle's child looks like the Duc de Chartres through me."

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VI

By seven o'clock in the evening Madame de La Monnerie had succeeded in persuading her niece.

"Since he has more money than you have, the marriage will have a plausible air. In three days' time you'll leave for Switzerland, while he's arranging his business affairs. You'll meet there, having come from different directions. You'll send for your papers from there and then get married. Everything can be arranged in a fortnight. Olivier agrees to stay in Switzerland for a year so as to cover, to some extent, the birth of the child. My dear girl, here's an opportunity you don't deserve and which, moreover, you entirely owe to me. Only just now he was asking me to marry him. Without saying that I was prepared to go so far as that, I must admit that his long absence will be somewhat painful to me. And, what's more, he is, after all, one of us. He's the son of—at least he passes for being—well, you know whom! He's illegitimate, which makes the whole thing more suitable. Anyhow, you've no choice! This is how it will be! Come in!"

The dinner took place in the dining-room of the *Hôtel des Thermes*, amid the whisperings of middle-aged ladies who had come to *Bagnoles* to nurse their change of life, or of old ladies who came regularly from habit, the shrill barking of their Pekinese dogs and the rustle of green plants lined up in their pots.

Olivier was wearing a dinner-jacket, as he always did in the evening, but he had put a carnation in his button-hole to make himself look younger. Shy man that he was, and at sixty-eight his voice still quavered when he spoke to a woman, he went straight to the point as someone more assured would scarcely have dared to do. Taking advantage of the moment when Madame de La Monnerie was lagging behind to give an order to the porter, he said: "It appears that this is our engagement dinner, my dear Isabelle. I must admit that, in the days when I used to play with you at your aunt's, not really so very many years ago, I did not foresee that our destinies would one day be united; or, rather, that you would unite your destiny to what remains of mine. I very well know that I am no spectacular fiancé. I cannot expect you to jump for joy."

It was almost as if he were making excuses for himself.

"I imagine," he went on, "that you wish it to be only a marriage in name. Let me reassure you. At my age it would be difficult for it to be otherwise."

He blushed at having to say it, and looked at the herringbone pattern of the parquet floor before adding: "All I ask of you is . . . you see, the name I bear is neither particularly distinguished, nor particularly infamous, but promise me to respect it, to be discreet . . . It's all I ask of you."

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"They go wonderfully with the veins in the marble," she said. "Don't you think so? You're looking depressed, Monsieur Lachaume. I hope nothing's worrying you? It must be your work. You work too hard. I had hoped to ask a few friends whom you would have enjoyed meeting. But they were not free. Lartois was to come. He put me off. He had an urgent case. I'm sorry to have no company to offer you but my own. I'm afraid I shall bore you."

She offered him some wine from Carthagène, syrupy and golden, in a curious twisted glass so frail that one feared it might fall to pieces in one's hands.

"Would you believe it, Carthagène is only a small village north of Béziers," she exclaimed. "A few bottles of this wine are produced every year. It was Jean who discovered it. He liked to think that the name had had an influence on its taste, and that one could believe one was drinking the wine Salammô drank. Perhaps, indeed, it was soldiers from Hannibal's army..."

They dined in a sort of rotunda at the end of the drawing-room, sitting at a very low round table composed of a mosaic mounted on a gilded pedestal, extremely awkward to the knees. Marie-Hélène Éterlin seemed to accommodate herself admirably to the height of the table which was almost at ground level: she sat upright on a pouf, extending her legs sideways and eating with delicate gestures of her frail wrists.

"It was Jean's idea to have this mosaic mounted like this," she said.

She pronounced "Jean" lingering on the first consonant and paused imperceptibly after the name. Every time she said "Jean," he thought of Isabelle.

They were waited on by Madame Éterlin's one servant. She was discreet and silent. On the table candles burned in Italian candelabra, decorated with thin silver-gilt leaves.

"Some barbarians had had them altered for electric light," said Madame Éterlin. "I had them restored to their original condition."

But in restoring them to their original condition the holes through which the barbarian flex had passed had been neglected. Drops of candle-grease fell on to the mosaic and on to Simon's sleeve whenever he put out an arm.

Every other source of light was hidden, irradiating secretly the Venetian glass, the spun gondolas, the mother-of-pearl fans, seeming to cast sunbeams on to the mirrors.

After a delicious, elaborate, but not very substantial dinner, the servant brought finger-bowls with flower-petals floating in them. While Madame Éterlin rinsed her pale well-kept nails in the warm water, Simon rinsed his square ones at the end of their hairy fingers. Their hands danced opposite each other like a ballet.

"Do you know why your flowers meant so much to me?" she said, rising. "Because today's my birthday."

"Oh, if I had only known . . ." Simon cried.

He had no idea what he would have done if he had known.

"But you've guessed it, since you brought me flowers and have come yourself. Without you I should have been all alone. Yes, I'm forty-four years old tonight. Oh, how stupid I am to speak of it to you! But, you know, it's sad for a woman to reach the age when"—and she pointed to the vases of lilies—"she has to order her own flowers."

Touched, not so much by what she said but because her sorrow reminded him of his own, beat on it as if it were a bell, he very nearly confided in her, saying: "You know, I'm unhappy too, and you've done me good with your Carthagène wine, your gilt mirrors and your finger-bowls. This is how things are between Isabelle and me."

"I'll fetch some of Jean's poems which I haven't yet dared show you," she said. "And then I'll show you some of mine, if they won't bore you."

She opened a drawer under the marble top on which the roses stood, took out a sheaf of papers and a manuscript-book bound in red morocco, and handed the papers to Simon.

They were licentious, erotic poems, their rhymes often frankly obscene, and all written in the beautiful black ink the poet used. The lines sometimes wavered a little, and the erasures, generally so moving a part of a manuscript, were here positively shocking.

Simon was embarrassed and did not know what to say.

Madame Éterlin looked at him sideways with a half-smile and said: "Oh, now that one, that one's really quite extraordinary! How wonderful to be able to put one's talent to anything and with such extraordinary wit!"

Her breathing came faster. Then, seeing that her enthusiasm was not shared, she said: "You don't care much for that sort of thing, do you?"

She looked disappointed.

"Oh, yes, of course," replied Simon. "It's astonishing. I like them very much. I had no idea . . ."

He read them as quickly as he could, but not so fast as to appear to be taking no interest in them. The phrases over which his eyes ran caused no other physical reaction than a sort of disquiet. His admiration for the writer received a check: he had discovered a corner of corruption beneath the pedestal.

Two or three times Madame Éterlin attempted to turn the conversation in that direction: but Simon had no words with which to reply: he did not know how to manage obscene double-meanings. He was embarrassed by this, too, and realized that it was a gap in his education.

He was relieved when they turned to the red morocco manuscript-book which contained Madame Éterlin's poems.

They were bad, but lyrical. Feeble imitations of the La Monnerie

of *L'oiseau sur le lac*, written in a pale, spidery hand on cream-coloured pages surrounded by a golden rule. There were a few corrections in the poet's hand. The last piece, written on the poet's death, was the worst. There were still many empty pages in the manuscript-book.

"That's all," said Madame Éterlin.

Simon complimented her warmly. She thanked him with sincere modesty. She was not deceived. She knew her poems lacked quality, but could not help showing them.

She was wearing a black dress with tulle round the top of the corset. Through the thin net appeared the white soft flesh of her shoulders and the double shoulder-straps of her bodice and silk shift, and her thin arms, the arms of a young woman. Her breasts were those of a young woman too.

"Why did she seem to me so old that first day?" Simon wondered. "I can't understand it. She isn't at all old."

She was sitting, leaning against him, on the arm of his chair, closing the manuscript-book, collecting up the erotic poems. Her neck was delicate with ivory reflections, her fine ash-blonde hair was pulled up on to the top of her head where it flowed into a twisted plait. One of her ears was slightly deformed. Her skin gave off a scent of heliotrope, and this scent seemed to be the nucleus about which the heavy diffused perfume of the lilies revolved.

Simon placed his lips against her bent neck. Madame Éterlin sat up straight and the intensity of her gaze seemed too large for her tiny mauve eyes: they looked straight into Simon's, through the crystal partition of his glasses. Their faces were very close together. She pulled Simon's head down to her mouth.

Towards midnight, wearing a thin dressing-gown of rose-coloured silk, her hair loose and reaching to her waist, Madame Éterlin went down to the kitchen in search of bread, butter and ham.

A little later Simon left. She accompanied him as far as the porch that gave on to the garden. He was now calling her Marie-Hélène. The night was fine, moonlit, warm and star-spangled. From far away, beyond the street, where the river lay, came the sound of a motor-boat engine. Madame Éterlin pressed her face to Simon's chest.

"It's marvellous," she murmured. "It's been so long, so long. Poor Jean, these last years, you know, one must admit... and you're so young! It's marvellous. I feel exquisitely pure when I'm in your arms. Do you remember those lines of Jean's:

*La jeune fille en toi qui ne peut pas mourir
Et que tu porteras jusque dans les enfers...*"

Simon left, bearing the stigmata of his evening: stains of rice-powder on his waistcoat, pollen from the lilies, and grease from the candles.

As he walked home, he still saw the bust with the blind plaster eyes in her bedroom, and the memory of Madame Éterlin's over-muscular legs.

For the first time he had doubts as to the value of Jean de La Monnerie's work and wondered whether his critics were not partly right. But then he said to himself: "I'm a beast. An absolute beast. Isabelle is pregnant and at Bagnoles. And I've just, well, been with this woman who hates her."

And curiously enough his certainty of being a beast produced in him the immediate and salutary sensation of being a man.

When, next day, Isabelle returned to Paris and told him of her departure and marriage to Olivier Meignerais, and of her intention of being loyal to it, he naturally suffered a moment of utter despair. He said over and over again: "If only I hadn't a wife, if only I hadn't a wife . . ."

Simon and Isabelle swore to each other that they would preserve their mutual love and that, later on, they would continue their relationship, without, of course, in any way hoping for the death of that admirable man Olivier. She promised that she would bring up their child with a taste for letters and intellectual pursuits. It did not occur to them that it might not be a boy. Isabelle already foresaw the day when he would be eighteen and she would tell him the truth.

"By then I shall already be turning into an elderly, respectable woman with white hair, and you'll have become a famous man. You'll come and dine with me from time to time. And we'll always take each other's hands in the same way."

But underneath they both knew that it was all over; and, if they were emotional, it was not so much because they were being separated as because it put an end to a period of their lives.

Simon congratulated himself on having begun an affair with Madame Éterlin.

He went to the little house in Boulogne several evenings a week. It was the holiday period. Paris was deserted. His duties at the office compelled him to stay there, and his evenings would have been utterly boring without Marie-Hélène. Thanks to her he was able to jump the usual bleak interval of emotional loneliness.

Marie-Hélène had changed her hair-style; she now wore it in two coils over her ears which, she thought, made her look younger and concealed the slight deformation of her ear. She had shortened her dresses a handsbreadth, without however going so far as the present fashion, for fear of showing too much.

"One day," she said to Simon, "I know very well that I shall lose you. When one has a lover older than oneself, one lives in terror of his dying; when he's younger, one lives in terror of other women. Either way he's bound to be taken from you."

Simon felt at home in her narrow, exquisite interior, where the

shadow of the great man loomed behind every piece of furniture. From time to time he met the elderly and the famous there. His manners a conversation, even his appearance, were improved. He allowed himself to be bewitched by Marie-Hélène Éterlin's affected melancholy which was suddenly shot through with sharp flashes of passion. In fact, found there the love that Isabelle had hoped might fill their future.

For the first time he no longer held back the thoughts of his background and memories of his childhood. Indeed, he recalled them for the satisfaction of making the comparison. And when he dipped his fingers into the rose-petalled finger-bowls, he said to himself: "This you, Simon, really you, the son of old Mother Lachaume, and you're really here at this moment!"

He no longer envied others; he only envied himself and had, therefore, no reason to be other than happy.

VIII

The Colonel of Hussars came on parade buttoning his gloves, ran his eyes over his troops and issued some verbal modifications to his order of the day before. He looked harassed: he had just re-read the order of the day.

The sun had already risen above the roofs of the buildings. A summer mist, like golden cotton-wool, lying far over the country south of Tarbes, still clung to the foothills of the Pyrenees.

The troops were drawn up on three sides of the parade ground while the band stood each side of the main gateway, their backs to the long railings behind which spectators were already gathered.

The Hussars, up since dawn to groom their horses, polish their steel and run up and down stairs with saddles on their heads, chased by the cries of non-commissioned officers, were having their first breather. The horses pawed the ground with their oiled hooves.

The most frequently repeated phrase in the ranks was, "I'm fed up!"

The battalion of Chasseurs-à-Pied, who were taking part in the parade, had just crossed the town at their usual rapid pace, and with perhaps an added buoyancy. The men in their dark-blue uniforms, were still sweating, and they had not yet regained their breath.

"Parade! . . ." shouted the Hussar Colonel in a strange, lingering voice as if there were an echo in his throat.

The clock on the central building showed a quarter to ten. Eyes looked up from beneath the rims of helmets, gazing at the big hand, and everyone felt a little nervous tension. None of them could have said why, but this moment suddenly seemed significant.

"PRE . . . sent Arms!" shouted the Colonel.

And a second later there was nothing but a great silent square of

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bright gravel, lined with bayonets and gleaming, serried sword-blades, straight as a well-kept hedge. Each soldier, a leaf within the hedge, was moved by that particular emotion which has nothing to do with sentiment: military pride. For, to remain still, keeping one's balance on a fidgety horse, with a four-and-a-half-pound sword before one's face and four reins between the fingers of one's left hand, one's eyes steadily fixed on an upper window, was difficult enough in itself. It was an unnatural contortion like certain Buddhist attitudes which lead to complete detachment. It banished all thought, created within each man a void, a sense of vacuum.

This void was nevertheless receptive to the most important and majestic of military myths. One more urgent even than patriotism, more transcendent even than the flag: the myth of the Commanding General.

Owing to a tactful arrangement on the part of the Hussars, the infantry had the sun full in their eyes.

The General came through the gate and advanced into the great square of white gravel: or rather the Generals did, for there were two of them. But the second one did not count: he looked like a samoyed dog walking beside his master.

The true General, the one who was the incarnation of the myth, was tall, thin, and elegant beneath his abundantly brassed hat. He advanced, throwing his stiff leg before him with a superb, supple movement that added to his dignity. His walking-stick seemed only an ornament.

He came to a halt; slowly his eyes ran down the ranks of bright blades, aligned elbows, upright heads, and the fine crests of horses; slowly and sorrowfully.

It was he who had ordered the parade, but the reason for it was bitter to him and the sight painful. From afar he appeared impassive, standing there with the insignia of the Legion of Honour about his neck; and yet his jaw was working and the knuckles of his hand were white about his stick.

"Stand at ease," he said.

He could feel through his tunic-pocket the three typed pages whose contents he knew by heart. From time to time he felt them with his fingers through the cloth, creasing them. "By decree of the Minister of State for War, Brigadier-General Fauvel de La Monnerie, Robert, is promoted to the rank of Major-General to date from the 29 July 1921 . . . By decree of the Minister of State for War, to date from the 29 July 1921, Major-General Fauvel de La Monnerie, Robert, is placed on the retired list of the Army etc. . . . By decree of the Minister of State for War the undermentioned is to replace Major-General Fauvel de La Monnerie etc. . . ." Three phrases that fitted together, interlocking, like the three last pieces of a jigsaw puzzle begun forty-five years

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ago, in somewhat similar surroundings, at the passing-in parade at Saint-Cyr.

During this near-half-century he had successively occupied every possible position on parade: after every promotion, every change of command, garrison, or latitude, after every manœuvres, campaign, wound and decoration, the square had reformed; and each time he had taken up a new position until he had reached the mythical station of today. The square ultimately was no more than the reflection of a single personality, that of Robert de La Monnerie, at every period from adolescence to maturity, in every rank and every posting. Here he was, multiplied several hundred times, drawn up on four sides of the square all about himself. The square was closed. The puzzle complete. He felt a curious sense of vertigo.

"It's the heat," he thought. "I don't feel too well."

They had stood at ease for a moment, as if to thank the General for his thoughtfulness, but now the sword-blades were upright before their faces again. The Colonel shouted: "General salute!"

The trumpeters performed that exquisite movement which makes the sun glitter on the brass of their instruments, and Cornet Santini, escorted by two sergeant-majors, cantered up, sitting straight in his saddle and carrying the gold-crowned standard. The Corsican Cornet came to a halt with admirable precision twenty paces from the General.

The latter saluted, his hand to his cap: a salute that would tomorrow be imitated by the young second lieutenants. As he did so, he was saying to himself: "That's good: the standard in the centre of the picture, the waving silk." The persistence of this childish comparison with a puzzle irritated him at such a moment and he wondered how he had come to make it. And then he remembered that he had given his great-nephew, Jean-Noël, a game of this kind. The subject was: "The Review." It had been a beautiful puzzle and had cost him a hundred francs. He saw in his mind's eye, on the cover of the box, the multi-coloured picture that had to be built up.

With the quick march of the Chasseurs, the infantry colours were brought side by side with the others.

"Stand at ease," said the General once again.

He took a pace forward, moving still further from the group of officers and personages who accompanied him, looked to right and left, and said: "Officers, non-commissioned officers and soldiers of the Military Subdivision of the Hautes-Pyrénées! I am happy to introduce you to your new commander, General Crochard!"

In a slow, clear, carrying voice, he eulogized this "gallant officer, who comes from that proved arm, the infantry," and rendered homage, in passing, to the Chasseurs-à-Pied. He expressed the wish that the troops would show "towards this leader, nurtured in the best principles of command," all the respect and obedience of which he was worthy.

ISABELLE'S MARRIAGE

Then, after a pause, he concluded: "At the same time I am saying goodbye . . ."—he coughed so naturally that his emotion was not visible— "... before this standard of the Hussars of Chamborant who, together with the Esterhazy Hussars, in which I had the honour to hold my first command, are one of the oldest regiments of light cavalry"—he coughed again: "I must not give way," he thought. "I must get on and finish . . ."—"I say goodbye to the arm in which I have served all my life, the Cavalry!"

He had put all his heart into these last words, but his farewell moved no one but himself. At the hospital windows the malingerers, leaning on their elbows and enjoying the parade in which they were not taking part, said, yawning: "The old chap's like us, glad to get out of it!"

General Crochard, looking like a samoyed dog, stepped forward in his turn. He had expected to hear a longer and more fulsome speech about himself; he was slightly vexed. Moreover, he was irritated by the Cavalry affectation of calling their regiments by the names of the Ancien Régime. He would have liked to curtail the panegyric of his predecessor which he had prepared. But he had conscientiously learnt it by heart and his memory now refused to cut it by a single word.

General de La Monnerie listened with a distant air. As had been the soldiers', a little while ago, on his arrival, it was now his mind that was a vacuum, emptied of all thought. He listened to the enumeration of his own virtues: "... A thoroughbred warrior . . . One who embroiders on our colours the imperishable gold of victories . . ."

It was now his turn in the ceremony to be transcended by the myth of the good General, the friend of his men, of the great General who was as indefatigable in battle as he was in the labours of peace: "... the fabled General who should be an example to all young soldiers called on to serve their country, and whom this Subdivision will always remember with pride and gratitude."

To conceal his soldierly emotion, the thoroughbred warrior from time to time bent his head to the left and blew on his decorations.

Someone touched him on the arm; it was time for the investiture.

He moved forward, throwing his stiff leg before him. A wide-bottomed commandant of dragoons accompanied him, as well as a non-commissioned officer carrying the box of medals.

"Gilon, what's the exact formula?" he asked the commandant of dragoons in a low voice. "Remind me . . ."

"In the name of the President of the Republic and in virtue of the powers conferred on me . . ."

"Yes, that's it! And what about the Médaille Militaire?" he asked once more.

"In the name of the Minister for War . . ."

"Yes, yes, that's it, I remember. I always got them mixed."

He murmured to himself: "In the name of the Minister for War—"

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that bastard and his three decrees." He tapped the typewritten pages through his tunic.

"Sound the fanfare!"

The fanfare was behind him, the recipients were lined up, Commandant Gilon to his right was reading the citations, the non-commissioned officer was handing him the crosses, and officers, already members of the Legion of Honour, were presenting swords to the Chevaliers; all of them were now revolving about him, deacons about a bishop, communicants awaiting the unleavened bread.

He felt as if he were an outsider looking on. His voice seemed to echo in some cavern of the universe where the atmosphere had become rarefied.

"... In the name of the President of the Republic..."

The flat of the sword on the right shoulder, the flat of the sword on the left shoulder. Fixing the metal clips with some difficulty into Captain Padoue's tunic, he asked him: "Didn't I once know a Padoue who commanded the Dragoons of Lorraine?"

"It was my uncle, sir!"

"Excellent! I congratulate you!"

The accolade. The rolling of drums and sounding of trumpets. The movement of arms along the sides of the square.

"In the name of the Minister for War..."

Facing the General was a fine-looking regimental sergeant-major. Nineteen years' service but with no prospect of further promotion. He was retiring, to become a Customs Officer no doubt. His eyes were full of little red veins.

"Well, he won't weep anyhow," thought the General.

He shook hands with the newly decorated man and said a few kindly words.

Once again the voice of the Colonel of Hussars seemed to echo from his throat. The troops prepared to march past.

The Chasseurs-à-Pied moved off first to the sound of their bugles. It was as if each file was backed by an invisible wooden lath, like a row of cathedral chairs.

Then, with the squeaking of leather and white girths, foaming bits, clinking spurs, slung muskets and swords, the squadrons marched past, giving the General, standing still as a statue, a last gust of the smell of sweat, both men's and horses', and dust. Then the ranks had swept by and the dust settled again.

The General, still accompanied by the samoyed, went to meet the Colonel of Hussars.

"Colonel, I congratulate you on the fine turnout of your men," said the samoyed.

"Monsieur, your regiment marched past well; I compliment you on it," said General de La Monnerie more slowly.

ISABELLE'S MARRIAGE

He went towards his car. He heard behind him, from the direction of the stables, the command "Dismount!" followed by great shouts of laughter from the pieces of the puzzle.

IX

He had taken off his uniform, and put away his star of the Legion of Honour in its box with his other decorations. He was wearing a vest and short pants with, above them, a corset of strong cloth with metal hooks about his abdomen. The long scar made a rose-coloured line down his leg. He went on giving vent to his resentment while limping about among the luggage that littered his room.

"Well, you see, my dear chap, what a band of idiots, what a menagerie of bastards, these politicians are? One used to be able to say of them, 'What they need is a good war to teach them a lesson.' Well, they've had one and didn't even understand it. Idiots, I tell you!"

This speech was addressed to Commandant Gilon, the dragoon with the wide bottom, who was sadly assisting the preparations for departure. In one corner a servant was packing a uniform-box.

"No! Not like that, Charamon," the General cried. "I've told you twenty times to put the shoes underneath. Good God! . . . Of course, I know very well what happened," he went on. "You know me, Gilon! I've always been outspoken: and it's not to everyone's liking. Besides, to have a name with a handle to it, as those English fools, who've nothing good but their horses, say, still meant something at one time. Now it's become a liability."

He examined all the possible reasons, turned them over, chewed on them, all except the true one: age.

"I think it's absolutely disgraceful, sir," said Commandant Gilon.

He was a rather heavy forty, with a high-coloured but pleasant face. His calves stretched the buttons of his white gaiters. A signet-ring with a worn crest had sunk into the flesh of his little finger.

"I think I shall send in my papers," he went on. "I was happy with you, sir. It's recaptured those war days when I served under you. But now, where will they send me and to whom? Besides, I shall have to wait three or four years for promotion. If I get it then."

"And as for Crochard, you heard him?" said the General. "Not one single word about my campaign in Madagascar. Not a word! He's just a bastard of a staff officer!"

"That's why," said the Commandant, rubbing his bristling moustache with his finger, "I'd rather pack up and go than stay with a fellow like that. I'll retire to Montpréy; I shall look after the estate; I'll have my hunters. Perhaps I'll get married, it's high time . . ."

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Thus they discussed things, though in reality each was thinking only of his own personal problem.

"Charamon!" cried the General. "Come and tie my laces, will you?"

Commandant Gilon said: "By the way, sir, the local press want a photograph of you."

"Humph! . . . The press! You know my opinion of journalists, don't you?"

The Commandant kept silent, awaiting the General's decision. The latter said: "Charamon, give me that brief-case over there, the black leather one; yes, that's right!"

He sat down at the table, blew on his vest at the place where his decorations would have hung, put on his pince-nez and lit a cigarette. He extracted a number of photographs from a transparent envelope, spread them before him and studied them with care.

"Not that one," he said. "I look as if I've sand on my nose. I don't know how those fellows with their damned boxes of tricks manage to make one look like that. That one wouldn't be too bad but, damn it, I must have moved my hand. You'd better give it to them all the same. It's the best, I think: besides, it's my better profile."

"Could I please have one for myself, sir?" asked Commandant Gilon.

"Of course, my dear chap, with pleasure! Here, choose one."

And across the trousers of his effigy, the General wrote: "To my faithful comrade of the war, Commandant Charles Gilon, with esteem and friendship. General de La Monnerie, July '21."

"Thank you, sir!" said Gilon standing stiffly to attention in his gaiters, his expression radiant.

"You see," the General went on, "how right I was to keep my flat in Paris! I should be in a pretty state with nowhere to go now that I've been bowler-hatted by that fool of a Minister!"

"Anyway, sir, you know that you've a standing invitation to Montprély!"

"Thank you, my dear chap, thank you. I shall most certainly come and see you . . . Charamon, come and help me dress!"

The servant slipped his plain-clothes trousers over his stiff leg.

"It makes me sad, sir," he said heavily, "to be dressing you for the last time."

He hardly ever spoke and, when he did, it was only to utter facts. He had a round head with dark, close-cropped hair.

Commandant Gilon asked: "Charamon, how many years' service have you?"

"Ten years, sir. Always as a servant."

"It's a vocation with him," the General explained. "Like some men have a vocation to be a valet. He went through the whole war, was mentioned three times, and won the Médaille Militaire for having

brought his officer in on his back, and he's never wished to be anything else. It appears that I'm the crown to his career. And with it all he's as stubborn as a mule . . . Look, he even packed my shoes on top! He's maddening!"

"If you pack them underneath, you can't put the trousers in flat, sir," the servant said calmly.

"And he'd go through hell for me. Wouldn't you Charamon?"

"Yes, sir."

"And would you do the same for the Commandant?"

"Yes, if I were his servant, sir."

"Here, go and get drunk to my health," said the General handing him a large banknote.

Drawing Commandant Gilon to the window, he said confidentially: "You see, that's the kind of thing it's difficult to leave, my dear chap: fellows like that . . ."

He touched the flat of his sword with his hand.

"And to put up this piece of hardware . . ."

He seemed to be dreaming. "It was Urbain who gave it to me when I passed out of Saint-Cyr," he thought. "It's a long time ago now. I've charged with that, killed men with it, because at bottom it's the purpose of our profession to kill men. And when one's no longer young enough to kill . . ."

"The scabbard's like me; it's becoming worn," he added aloud.

"But the blade's good, sir!" said Commandant Gilon with a proud smile.

The General took this for a lewd reference.

"Yes, and that's not . . . quite what it was either. These days the girls mustn't be too young, nor too old."

"Well, sir," said Gilon, glad to see the conversation taking a better turn, "your train's not till three o'clock: let's go and have a good luncheon. Allow me to invite you."

"Oh no, my dear chap, I'm still your chief, if you don't mind. You'll let me be host."

Gilon was much richer than the General and therefore did not insist.

The servant was engaged in smoothing out the banknote on the lid of a uniform-box with the palm of his hand.

"What are you up to, Charamon?" asked the General. "Aren't you going to spend it?"

"I think I'll just keep it, sir," said the servant.

The General, inclining his barely lined forehead to the left, blew away imaginary dust.

"You're quite right. Let's have a good luncheon. From now on, it's all I've got left," he said.

His loneliness was not really brought home to him till he woke up in his flat in the Avenue Bosquet. He had not had time to engage a servant. It was the concierge who came to make his breakfast and open the windows. The light shone in on gloomy, dusty rooms; everything was dulled from having been shut up for several months. He felt as if he were coming home the day after his death.

He found his shoes badly cleaned and cleaned them again himself. He tried to put on his trousers by himself, but found he could not manage it without considerable pain. He was compelled to ask the concierge's help. She was a woman of under forty and did not seem very keen to assist him. Less than three years before, after the Armistice, nothing had been too good for the wounded hero; she would not then have touched him without washing her hands and tidying her hair. Today her expression was one of contemptuous disgust for an old man who had to be dressed. She made it clear that she was not prepared to perform this service for long.

Throwing his leg in front of him, the General toured the space to which his life was now reduced. There were salamander stoves in the fireplaces, a jumble of imitation Louis XIII furniture, and Berber and Sudanese trophies; a silver-embroidered Moroccan saddle was lying moth-eaten in the anteroom; the edges of the books had turned grey; and the signed photographs from his old chiefs, Galliéni, Joffre and others less illustrious, had turned yellow. Yesterday he had congratulated himself that he had preserved this abode and would find his relics in their familiar places. Now he felt that he would have liked to be in a hotel, or abroad, or anywhere for that matter provided it were not here.

"I must do something, or I shall go mad," he told himself. "I don't give myself a month before I put a bullet through my head. To think that I was glad to recover from my wound. What a fool I was! When one has the luck to be in a coma . . ."

He had no family, had not followed the general law, was without wife and children.

"I have lived as an egoist, and this is my punishment. Yet why should I be punished? What have I done to deserve it?" During a single quarter of an hour, he thought of becoming a monk, "so as to think of nothing any more," of taking up politics, and of standing for the Senate, so as to be able to tell "those bastards" a thing or two.

But he knew all this was merely letting off steam. He must begin by buying plain clothes and having his flat painted.

He went and had luncheon in the Cercle Militaire. At this time of year few people went there: only those who did not know what else to do, retired officers, like himself, but who had gone several years before him.

ISABELLE'S MARRIAGE

They were sparsely scattered over the vast gilded saloons and the library, sleeping after their meal or, gathered in a bow-window, three or four of them would whisper together like conspirators. From time to time one of them would get up and walk with dragging step to fetch an illustrated paper from a table and then go and sit down again. Or, suddenly, a parade-ground voice would ring through the morgue to tell a waiter to bring a cup of black coffee. But the comatose were undisturbed.

Nevertheless, when General de La Monnerie came in, they raised their spectacles from their papers, marked their places in their books with gouty fingers, and interrupted their plotting. They looked like chair-keepers in a church when they see the new Child of Mary arriving.

An old man with a beard, and a rosette the size of a two-shilling piece, yellow eyes and shaking hands, came up to him.

"Well, my young friend?" he said.

His great campaign, the one that lingered most vividly in his recollection, was the Italian one.

"I was just telling these friends," he went on, indicating the conspirators, "how on the evening of Solferino, MacMahon very nearly fought a duel only a couple of yards away from the Emperor with the commander of the Third Corps. I had had the honour of being his *aide de camp* since Magenta . . ."

"Hullo, La Monnerie!" cried a fat man with a blotched face and hair cut *en brosse*.

"How are you, Colonel?" said General de La Monnerie.

The fat man put his great paw on the General's shoulder. His cheeks swelled as he spoke and he breathed hard between his words.

"Excellent . . ." he said, "he hasn't forgotten. Do you see, gentlemen, . . . puff . . . this young man who does us all honour . . . You'll forgive my referring to you like that . . . Well, it was I who taught him strategy at the *École de Guerre*. And he hasn't forgotten. Excellent . . . puff . . . excellent. And he always calls me 'Colonel'."

A thin rake of a man with dyed hair clicked his senile heels and went off without uttering a word.

"Who was that?" asked General de La Monnerie.

"Mazury," replied the fat man. "Didn't you recognize him? He was one of your contemporaries at the *École*, and another of my old pupils . . . puff . . . but," he added, lowering his voice, "there was a most unfortunate incident in Senegal: I'll tell you about it."

"Mazury! Well, really," La Monnerie murmured. "He looks terrible!"

"You see, we all meet again. Life's like that . . . Supposing we played a game of bridge, General?"

La Monnerie made his excuses and left as quickly as he could. No,

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he could not end his life like this. He was sick of hearing himself called "General" by his ex-seniors who had retired two ranks lower than he had, or "my young friend" by Methuselahs like MacMahon's old *aide de camp*. And those yellowing moustaches, those purple or waxen cheeks, those bald, blotched skulls, those trembling knees. "No! No! No!" he said to himself. "I haven't come to that yet. I'm still young, by God, I've still got a little sand in the belly."

Without his damned stiff leg he could have turned a cartwheel in the middle of the Place Saint-Augustine, or thrown the bloody civilians out of the first bar he came to, as he used to do when he was a lieutenant in Biskra. He did not realize that at every few steps he was blowing on the rosette in his buttonhole.

The post he found when he got home brought him a first sense of relief. He was asked to form part of the Committee of Honour of the Anciens Lauréats du Concours Général. Then Noël Schoudler sent him congratulations on his promotion, and spoke of a company for pharmaceutical products of which the board was not yet complete.

"Well," he thought, "there are still some people who don't think me utterly useless."

The editor of a work on the 1914-1918 war asked him for a contribution on the operations in which his unit had taken part.

A week ago, he would have refused the lot, committee, editor, and chemist, desiring them to leave him alone. Today he read the letters over again, reflected slowly, returned half a dozen times to the same idea because it filled in time. "I must look into this, I must look into it," he told himself.

At this moment Madame Polant arrived, her sharp instinct informing her that the retired list was a crisis as afflicting as death. She appeared only in the sort of circumstances where she was bound to be addressed as "my poor Polant."

The General largely agreed with Lucien Maublanc's opinion of her: that she was an old bitch. Nevertheless he was not altogether displeased to see her.

"Well, my poor Polant," he said, "here you see me, a member of the unemployed."

Madame Polant still wore her black hat but, for the summer, she had replaced her rabbit fur with a cream-coloured jabot of crêpe-de-chine, while the cool atmosphere of sacristies continued to preserve her complexion.

"What *are* you talking about, General!" she cried. "I'm sure you can't want for things to do. In a fortnight's time you'll be so busy you won't know where to turn."

"Oh, it's begun already," he replied, with a false air of weariness, pointing to the three letters on his desk. "They want me to sit on a lot of committees. I'm being asked for my war memoirs . . ."

ISABELLE'S MARRIAGE

"There you are! Besides, a man like you, who's seen all you've seen, ought to write his memoirs. It would be a sin to let them be lost. Besides, the gift of style's innate in the family."

"Yes indeed, I've been thinking about it for some time," he said.

It was exactly what she was hoping for. She explained that she had practically nothing to do now for Madame de La Monnerie who, moreover, was away taking the waters. The volume of the poet's posthumous works, which Mademoiselle Isabelle—"I mean to say Madame Meignerais, but I shall never remember to call her so"—had been working on with Monsieur Lachaume was now finished, recopied and delivered to the publisher.

"Tell me, what exactly has happened to Isabelle?" the General asked.

As an intimate friend of the family and familiar with its secrets, yet knowing how to keep them, she whispered the story which, for a few seconds, held the General's interest.

"As it seems that young Lachaume is responsible for my promotion," he said, "I can't bear him too much of a grudge. But when one thinks that it's coxcombs like that who conduct the affairs of France . . ."

Madame Polant's mornings were taken up by Father de Granvilage, the Dominican cousin of the La Monneries, who was preparing a selected edition of his sermons. But she was free in the afternoons. She said so three times during the course of conversation.

"I think it would be an admirable arrangement," said the General. "You could come in the afternoons, take my letters, and I would dictate my memoirs."

"Of course there would be no question of payment between us, General. You know, as far as I'm concerned, everything that has to do with the La Monneries . . ."

"But yes, most certainly, let's discuss the question at once. Life's difficult for all of us and I like things to be just so. Oh, and what's more, you must find me a cook-housekeeper," he added, already exacting. "You'll look after that for me. And send for a plumber: something's gone wrong in the bathroom."

He felt better. He had someone to give orders to. And she was delighted to play so important a part.

He suddenly asked: "What about your husband? What's happened to him?"

Her expression altered at once, and she bowed her head in grave sorrow.

"He's gone," she replied, "for the fourth time. He went out saying: 'I'm going to the hairdresser's.' That was six months ago and he hasn't come back yet."

She took out a handkerchief, wiped the corners of her eyes and said: "We all have our cross to bear."

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It was the only occasion on which the General showed any interest in his secretary's private life. He had always been profoundly egotistical; and now he was more than ever oblivious of other people's problems. When these problems arose in conversation, his expression grew distant, or he blew at the dust on his breast, which made the other person say: "I'm afraid I'm boring you with my affairs."

He would reply: "No, not at all," his eyes blank; he had not been listening.

He concentrated on himself with that pleasure in thinking only of himself, that positive self-relish, which most human beings acquire when they begin to get old.

His life moved more slowly. It was divided between committees, on which he sat with an absence of attention that people were kind enough to attribute to reflection, and the hours he worked with Madame Polant.

He wondered every day what on earth he was to give her to do, and indeed this was why she was indispensable to him.

"Oh," he would say, "this morning I was thinking over my memories of the Antananarivo affair. I'll dictate them to you, Polant."

And then, when he felt that he had done enough, he sent her to look something up in the Bibliothèque Nationale. Later, of course, he had to read the notes she brought back. From time to time he gave the impression of conferring a privilege on her by keeping her to dinner. This occurred on those evenings when his boredom had become intolerable.

The servant Polant had found him through the good offices of the Sisters of Saint-Vincent-de-Paul did not suit him.

He wrote to Charamon, his old soldier-servant, whose service was due to expire in December, to offer him the job. He lacked someone about him whom he could treat familiarly and swear at with his particular brand of good-natured surliness.

And thus he organized his life to drift slowly towards the still distant death of which he did not think overmuch.

Besides, it was precisely at this time that he began suffering from prostate, which gave him another sound reason for thinking only of himself.

XI

"... and, in particular, I must thank Madame Olivier Meignerais, the poet's niece, who has been kind enough to give me her constant and enlightened assistance in the completion of this task.

Simon Lachaume."

At this point Isabelle placed her finger in the book, and smiled sadly.

The autumn daylight was fading in the office in the Ministry of War. Simon was sitting with his back to the window and she could not distinguish his features clearly.

ISABELLE'S MARRIAGE

"I'd go so far as to say that you do it extremely well," she admitted with the immodesty of the very honest.

"Nonsense! I used to know how, once. I've even been complimented at times. But I hope," said Olivier, blushing once more, "that you're not going to be jealous of past adventures?"

"Oh, certainly not, I promise you, Olivier darling," she replied bursting into laughter.

It was the first time she had addressed him thus. And she felt that she had found the proper term. He was exactly that: Olivier was a "darling."

"There are some old trees," he said, "that give no fruit for years, and then suddenly produce a last crop, no one knows why."

"Well I hope the harvest lasts as long as possible."

"Thank you, my dear Isabelle, thank you! Well, what are we going to do today?" He was trying to think of something original and entertaining. If it had not been November, he would have felt like boating in the Bois de Boulogne. Finally he decided to take his wife to the Zoo.

"I must admit, my dear," said Olivier, "that I haven't been there for nearly sixty years. Wrap yourself up well."

The Zoo was ominous. There was not a soul on the paths. Dead leaves rotted in little circular heaps. Only the cedars and the larches had kept those black spikes on their boughs which are called evergreen.

Elderly bears and lions crouched shivering in the bottom of their pits. They looked as though they were remembering the last gladiator they had eaten. The hairless wolves, the blue-bottomed monkeys with pendent genitals, and the llama, all turned their sad, death-conscious animal eyes on the lonely couple.

A creased and leathery elephant raised his fifty-year-old trunk as if to trumpet, and merely yawned.

"And to think that all this amused me so much when I was a child!" said Olivier. "Decline's no more fun for animals than it is for man!"

"Really, Olivier darling!"

"Oh, I know, I'm ungrateful to say that. Fate is overwhelming, and in the most unexpected way. The niece who rewards the devotion shown her aunt. Really, one might think it was a novel by that admirable man Bourget."

"Be quiet," said Isabelle. "And what's more I don't ever want to hear you say you're old again."

"All right. I'll lie then."

She took him by the arm and to distract his attention made him play the game of likenesses. The birds provided them with most. Clutching the bars of his cage, his white feathers erect on his head, Urbain de La Monnerie, disguised as a cockatoo, was screaming at the top of his voice.

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The bald-headed adjutant birds, clothed in green wings drooping to their ankles, their long sad noses stuffed into their white waistcoats, were like so many Academicians.

"And that's me," said Olivier, pointing to a crane whose feathers were parted on its neck and with little lumps of down that looked like jowls. "*Tetropteryx paradisea*! Look at that! I've chosen well!"

He had recovered his good humour and decided that they would lunch at the Café de Paris.

These active mornings did not last very long. Soon Olivier began to laze in bed, and it was Isabelle who went to have breakfast in his room. He often woke up feeling vague and heavy in the head, but said nothing about it.

Their marriage seemed peaceful and happy; their friends were amused by it. The only person who took the changed relations between her niece and her old friend badly was Madame de La Monnerie.

"Well, are you happy, you young turtle-dove?" she asked Olivier.

"Very happy indeed, Aunt," replied Olivier smiling.

All the same, the nights when he waited to brush his hair in the bathroom, which was a sort of agreed signal between them, became rarer. Sometimes at dinner he avoided Isabelle's eyes. Then he would hear his wife going to and fro in her room and sometimes even sighing. Then he would stay there combing his hair, without really wanting to; or perhaps she would come in and undress in front of him. Then, between the sheets with the light out, he held her close for long moments in an involuntary chastity, and ended by asking her help.

"It'll tire you, darling," she whispered.

"No, I enjoy it."

After a time she no longer even waited till he asked.

One day he was seized with a fit of giddiness while dressing and lay sunk for several minutes on his bed, without knowing where he was, almost breathless. He pretended that he had lost his balance while putting on his trousers. But then for a short time the rhythm changed. In the morning, before dawn, he would go to his wife's room, then back to his own to sleep till midday, spend the rest of the day in the flat, yawn through dinner, and go to bed as soon as he had had his coffee.

Then he returned to the nocturnal rhythm.

The last harvest was a painful one. Moreover, Isabelle used it with less discretion as it approached its end. She seemed to be saying: "Let's make the most of it. When he can't do it any more, well, I shall have to go without."

He maintained, all the same, an appearance of good health, his complexion good, his conversation delightful. She half-believed that this physiological function was having no effect on him. And he awaited as a deliverance those all too short moments when she was indisposed.

ISABELLE'S MARRIAGE

Madame Polant called one day. Isabelle had not seen her for a long time. Madame Polant had come to ask after her, and for news of Monsieur Meignerais.

"He's very well indeed, brisker than ever," said Isabelle.

"I'm delighted."

She looked surprised, almost disappointed. Because of the time of year, she had taken to her rabbit boa again.

"Well, my dear Mademoiselle Isabelle . . . Oh, I shall never remember to say Madame Meignerais . . . Well, you're luckier than I am," she said. "Mine, you know . . ."

"What's the matter, Polant?"

"He hasn't come back yet. And I know where he is. And I daren't ask for a divorce, not for religious reasons, but because I know him! Just now he's in the thralls of the flesh. But if I asked for a divorce, he'd be quite capable of committing suicide. Because, when all's said and done, he's in love with me."

She dabbed at the corners of her eyes and nostrils.

"My poor Polant," said Isabelle.

"Luckily I've got so much to do for the General, that to a certain extent it takes my mind off things. I look after everything for him. He always says: 'Polant is my chief of staff!' We get on very well. And his memoirs are getting on, you know! It's most exciting."

She left without Isabelle's being able to discover the object of her visit.

Polant had merely come a few hours too early.

Professor Lartois was awakened in the middle of the night by Isabelle's hysterical voice on the telephone.

"Doctor, come at once! Olivier, my husband . . . Please, at once," she cried.

He came to a flat in chaos to find Olivier Meignerais with his face sunk in a blood-stained pillow, his eyes showing nothing but their whites. Rivulets of blood, not yet clotted, were pouring from his nostrils and his mouth. Lartois could make no other diagnosis but death.

Isabelle, collapsed in a chair, blood on her hair, her neck, and the top of her nightdress, was quivering with nerves and crying: "It's horrible, too horrible . . . It can't have happened, it can't! . . . He was on top of me, on top! . . . And suddenly the blood came! . . . It can't have happened! . . . He was holding me so tight. It's horrible, he was strangling me! I couldn't get free of him! I had to call the servants! It's horrible!"

"Now, calm down, child," said Lartois firmly.

"Never! Never!" she cried. "He was so strong! . . . Never! . . ."

Lartois made her get up, led her to the bathroom, and himself wiped the blood from her with a sponge.

"Well, this is a pretty kettle of fish!" he said.

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"Is it my fault, Doctor? Is it my fault? Oh, never, never!"

"Your fault, your fault? It's mostly his," Lartois replied. "Taken all in all, it's not too bad a death. I'm not at all sure that I wouldn't like to die that way myself. There, the cold water's doing you good, isn't it? Where's your medicine-cupboard?"

She made a vague gesture.

"Where's the medicine-cupboard?" he asked the housemaid who, though terrified, was watching every development.

She opened a little white cupboard on the wall.

Lartois searched among the bottles and quickly found a little box without a label that contained small white pills. He crushed one in his fingers and, putting the box back, said: "Yes, it's his fault all right. It's madness to use this sort of filth."

He produced a box of sleeping-pills, made Isabelle swallow two of them, and prudently replaced the box in his pocket, having made certain that the medicine-cupboard contained no other drugs.

Isabelle was sobbing loudly.

"What am I to do? What's to become of me?" she groaned. "It's too horrible!"

"In the first place you're going to bed," said Lartois. "We'll give you a good hot drink and your maid will sit up with you. I'll come and see you tomorrow morning."

"What about him? What about him? Poor darling! What are we going to do about him?" she groaned.

And turning to her maid, she said: "Send for Madame Polant, she'll cope with everything."

CHAPTER FOUR

The Schoudler Family

JEAN-NOËL, standing naked in front of the looking-glass, contemplated his skinny body and the slightly dilated stomach common to children. It was the morning of his birthday.

"They've lied to me!" he shouted, stamping his foot. "They've lied to me!"

He danced with rage.

For more than a week everyone had told him that he must be good "because when one is six one becomes a man," and that he must no longer put out his tongue at people or amuse himself by squinting

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"when one is about to become a man" and, finally, that he must now behave as if he were "grown-up," etc.

"What's the matter with you?" said Miss Mabel, coming to see why he was making so much noise.

"I'm not a man! I'm still small! Everyone's lied to me!"

"Say it in English."

"No! I won't ever speak English again. I'm still small. I'm not a grown-up. Marie-Ange..."

He was weeping tears of rage. He had really believed that he would wake up as tall as his father, and the day, therefore, had begun catastrophically.

He wanted to go and find his sister and take her to witness that he was still small. Miss Mabel had all the difficulty in the world in convincing him that he should wash and dress first. He scratched his nanny and pulled her hair. She tried to explain to him that his sister was still small too.

"And, you see, she's older than you are!"

"Yes, but she's a girl," Jean-Noël replied.

"Now, there's a big surprise for you this morning, your grandfather..."

"Which one?" asked Jean-Noël.

Between his two grandfathers, Siegfried, and Noël the giant, he never knew which they were talking about.

"Your great-grandfather," said Miss Mabel with greater precision.

At ten minutes to nine, dressed in a pretty little velvet suit with a white collar, Jean-Noël was taken to the door of his great-grandfather's room. The Baron Siegfried appeared. He was now ninety-four and completely shrivelled. Bent double over his stick, with his long stone-coloured whiskers, his enormous nose and drooping eyelids, he looked at once like an elderly chimera and the riddle of the sphinx.

"So, you've become a man today, have you?" he said, stroking the child's rosy cheek with his veined hand.

He drew a hoarse, noisy breath at every third word he uttered.

Jean-Noël looked at him suspiciously; but, as he badly wanted a toy train, he replied: "Yes Grandpa."

He perfectly understood that it was wiser not to tell elderly people that they were lying.

"Very well then, I shall... hum... teach you to do good. You will accompany me."

They walked down the passages of the huge house, slowly descended the great red-carpeted stone staircase. The child respectfully adjusted his pace to that of the old man who walked beside him with bent back, and wondered in which room the train might be. The phrase "to do good" baffled him.

In the hall, which was as big as the entrance to a museum, a footman placed a cape about Baron Siegfried's shoulders.

"What's going on?" he said, looking from the high windows into the courtyard where luggage was being carried to and fro. "Is somebody going away today?"

"Monsieur le Baron must be aware," replied the footman, "that Baron Noël is leaving for America."

"Oh, yes, of course, of course," said the old man.

Still accompanied by Jean-Noël, he went out by the covered porch to the porter's lodge.

"Well, Valentin, is everything ready?" he asked.

"Everything's ready, Monsieur le Baron," the porter replied.

"Are there many of them?"

"Oh, much as usual, Monsieur le Baron."

Valentin, the porter, a large red-faced man with protruding ears, was dressed in bottle-green livery: Jean-Noël was astonished to see that he held by his side a white wicker basket full of pieces of bread.

"Very well, open up then," the old man ordered.

On the pavement of the Avenue de Messine, for the whole length of the great wall that enclosed the courtyard of the Schoudler house, there waited a queue of old down-and-outs. When the wicket swung back on its hinges, they crowded slowly forward, ragged, filthy, and ulcerous. There were some fifty of them, all the very poor of the district which, in theory, was not supposed to have any. In the foggy grey February light they seemed to Jean-Noël an enormous crowd. Slowly, patiently, monotonously, they filed past the old sphinx with the drooping eyelids.

As each pauper went by, Baron Siegfried took a two-franc piece from his coat-pocket, a piece of bread held out to him by the porter and, holding the coin on the bread with his forefinger, placed the whole in the extended hollow formed by two dirty palms.

The down-and-outs went by saying "Thank you" or "Thank you, Monsieur le Baron," or sometimes saying nothing at all. Two black fingers would be raised to the torn peak of a cap or to a felt hat green with age, or they made a show of a military salute against a scurfy forehead.

"You see," the old man explained to Jean-Noël, "one must give in person so as not to . . . hum . . . wound those who receive."

Bleary, squinting, unhealthy, gummed-up, and blood-shot eyes gazed curiously at the child; while he, frightened by the disgusting sight of the beggars, outraged by their appalling smell and the hideous eyes turned on him, seized the cape in his little hand and, frowning, pressed close against his great-grandfather.

The old Baron, looked into every face, and occasionally honoured with a "good morning" his oldest clients, the more assiduous, those who

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for several years had provided him with his morning entertainment by coming to flaunt their misfortunes, everything that can attack and destroy a human being, at the door of his old-established wealth. The results of bad heredity, illicit love, innate disadvantages for which there is no cures, vices, physical imperfections, idleness, and the bad luck for which no other name can be found, the spectacle of this human filth that time was slowly carrying towards the drain of death remained one of the Baron's sole interests in life and preserved for him the sense of his own importance.

"You're in luck," he said to the child; "whatever Valentin may say, there seem to me to be a lot of them this morning."

Jean-Noël gripped the cape tighter.

"Oh, look at her nose, Grandpapa," he muttered. An old woman in a black silk dress, her hair a huge mass of scurfy tow, advanced towards them; her nostrils were at least half-eaten away and revealed greenish mucous membranes; the nose of an exhumed corpse.

"She was very beautiful once," replied the old man. "She used to sell flowers."

And as the old woman bent down towards Jean-Noël, smiling beneath her corpse-like nose, "He's my great-grandson," the old man explained proudly. "I'm teaching him to do good. There, Jean-Noël, you'll give it to her yourself, go on."

He placed the bread and the coin in the child's hands. Jean-Noël realized of his own accord that it was incumbent on him to smile as he handed them to her. Then he quickly wiped his hands on his velvet shorts.

"What a sweet child," said the old woman, "and how very well behaved for his age! You are our benefactor, Baron, our benefactor! May God bless you."

She was undoubtedly the old man's favourite beggar, for, over and above the normal ration, he handed her a ticket from the Philanthropic Society, giving her the right to a cup of chocolate distributed at the other end of Paris.

"Have you any news of your daughter?" he asked.

"She's on the streets, still on the streets, and it's a great sorrow to me," said the old woman as she moved away.

Behind her came a tiny figure with crooked legs and a shrunken, childish face.

"You mustn't laugh, Jean-Noël," said the Patriarch. "He's a dwarf."

But Jean-Noël had no desire to laugh. He merely looked round to see if Miss Mabel was coming to fetch him.

The old Baron thought his remarks were confidential but, in fact, he spoke out loud, and the dwarf, having heard him, passed on without thanking him. Then there followed a man of about thirty-five, thin, his eyes feverishly bright, his outstretched arms trembling.

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"No, not you," said the Baron angrily; "you're young and can work, you have . . . hum . . . no need to beg at your age."

And leaning down towards Jean-Noël, he added: "Charity should only be given to the old."

Jean-Noël wanted to ask him to give the thin man his ration all the same, but he was too frightened to speak. The thin man spat on the pavement and, as he went off, said: "You old swine!"

Neither Valentin, the porter, standing still with the basket at his hip, nor the other beggars, nor Jean-Noël, nor the Baron himself gave any sign of having heard.

A strange character, with the remains of a wig lying across his lined neck, came by, hat in hand and, accompanying his words with a theatrical gesture, said: "I am, Monsieur le Baron, for one day more your most obliged servant."

His formula varied every morning and, doubtless, he spent the whole long day deciding on it.

At the end of the queue was a couple in rags. The man was blind and walked with his face turned upwards to the sky. The woman, a basket on her arm, dragged her naked legs with suppurating varicose veins in down-at-heel shoes. They were arguing.

"You'll say 'thank you,' I order you to," said the man.

"No, I shan't say anything," the woman replied. "If they do it, it's because they can well afford it. We ought to set fire to the lot and start again from scratch."

When Baron Siegfried gave her the two pieces of bread and the four francs, she remained silent. But the man, his blind eyes still turned up towards the grey clouds, said loudly: "Thank you, sir! Thank you for both of us!"

The other down-and-outs were scattered about the Avenue de Messine; some were eating their bread; the majority had already disappeared, their feet led on through the streets by heaven knows what expectations, what hopes or search for forgetfulness.

"How many of them were there this morning, Valentin?" Baron Siegfried asked.

"Fifty-seven, Monsieur le Baron," the porter replied.

He closed the wicket.

The old man and the child went back through the hall and climbed the stairs. Jean-Noël was thoughtful. Siegfried hoisted himself painfully from stair to stair, breathing heavily and loudly. Half-way up they met Jérémie, the old valet, carrying down a suitcase.

"Is someone starting on a journey today?" the old man asked.

"Monsieur le Baron must be aware of it," replied the servant. "Baron Noël . . ."

"Ah, yes, of course . . . I know . . . hum . . . America."

Jean-Noël went on thinking all the way down the passage. He saw

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the woman with the wasted nose leaning towards him, the man in the wig, and the blind face turned towards the sky. He was reconstructing the whole appalling queue, seeking to prolong his repulsion, to revive it.

He suddenly pulled at the Patriarch's coat-tails.

"Grandpapa," he asked, "shall we do good again tomorrow?"

For the first time Jean-Noël's mind had received, and indeed it was a lasting impression, a taste for the morbid, an attraction towards the decadent and the unhealthy.

II

For Jean-Noël his birthday morning was also marked by another event: it was the first time he had been allowed to go into the study, and this was owing to the departure of his grandfather for the "New World."

Jean-Noël was struck by the sound of the phrase as he entered the room, and its sonority pleased him; however he immediately confused it with another expression he had heard the year before.

Old Baron Siegfried was sitting on a sort of backless velvet-covered stool; he used arm-chairs as little as possible since he had difficulty in getting out of them without assistance.

Baron Noël, the giant, he who was going on a journey, was leaning against the heavy Louis XV writing-table.

Young Baron François, who now that he was past thirty was beginning to grow stout, lifted up his child and said: "Good morning, darling, many happy returns of the day. Oh, you are heavy!"

And Jean-Noël's feet returned to the carpet.

"Oh, but of course," said Baron Noël, "today he's become a little man. Six years old, that's really something! What shall I bring you back from the New World?"

The child was always terrified when the huge torso, impenetrable as a breastplate, leaned over him, with the pointed beard and the dark narrow slits of eyes between the swollen lids.

"I really don't know, Grandfather," he replied. "Whatever you please."

The giant straightened up, made an inclusive gesture, and Jean-Noël heard him say from far up, from half-way to the ceiling: "Four generations of Schoudlers! That's fine! Very fine indeed!"

Baron François realized that his father was thinking: "Perhaps it's the last time we shall all be together." And his eyes instinctively turned to the Patriarch.

From then on no one paid any further attention to Jean-Noël and he was able to examine the study in peace. It was a big room lined entirely with dark-green leather and isolated by padded double doors. Mahogany or citron-wood filing-cabinets reached two-thirds of the way up the walls. The rest of the furniture was heavy, rich and ill-assorted. There were only two pictures on the study walls: the portrait of the

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first Baron Schoudler, Siegfried's father, Metternich's banker, who had been ennobled thanks to the statesman's good offices, dressed in a court dress of the period of Ferdinand II; while the other picture was of Siegfried himself, wearing a plain black frock-coat, painted in his prime by Carolus Duran.

The Austrian branch of the Schoudlers had disappeared with the childless death of Siegfried's two elder brothers. Siegfried himself, even though he had come to France to build up his own fortune and had become naturalized, had been confirmed in the title by the Emperor Francis Joseph. Moreover, Siegfried had on several occasions been useful in secret negotiations between Napoleon III and Vienna.

The Schoudlers had other offices in Paris. There was the old office at the bank in the Rue des Petits-Champs, and the ones at the newspaper founded by Noël, and the ones of a variety of other companies. But it was here, in the house built just before 1870, that the temple of their power, the centre, now hereditary, of their wealth and their strength, really lay. And when the male members of the family were gathered together within these green-leather walls, meals might grow cold or visitors impatient, but no one dared disturb them.

Jean-Noël put his hand on the door of a safe that was flush with the wall and whose colour was in keeping with the leather hangings. His delight in fiddling with unknown objects compelled him to turn one of the knobs which, as it changed its setting, produced a dry little clicking sound. Jean-Noël quickly withdrew his hand and turned round. He was blushing, his heart was beating hard and he felt at fault. Fortunately no one had heard him. The Patriarch was speaking.

"And who's to look after things with me while you're away?" he said to the traveller.

"François has everything in hand," replied Noël Schoudler. "He'll manage everything all right."

"Really, do you think the boy's got sense enough?" the Patriarch went on. "Has he the authority? Does he know what's going on?"

"Yes, Father, don't worry. Besides, François'll make no decisions without consulting you."

"Of course not, Grandfather," said François.

It was already nearly ten years since old Siegfried had taken any effective part in the management of the multiple affairs of the Schoudler family. Noël was in charge of everything. Nevertheless, the Patriarch remained nominally in power. His role nowadays was limited to signing from time to time some deed; but he did it so slowly and after demanding so many explanations that he still believed he was the master.

His respectful family, who never forgot that they owed almost everything to the old chief of the tribe, did their best to maintain the illusion without which he would probably have died on the spot. Besides,

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everyone hoped that he would reach his hundredth year. He had already passed the age when old people are a nuisance. His abnormal longevity was now a matter for admiration and indeed almost an honour, a supplementary family asset.

Besides, a sort of basic common sense which he produced from time to time, and which was always received with a great nodding of heads, maintained the impression that there was still some spark glowing in the old idol with the purple eyelids. Moreover, he had his memories, extraordinary because they dated from so long ago. As there are infant prodigies who play Schumann badly at the age of seven, so he was the ancient prodigy who could no longer remember the events of the past week but could be heard muttering that he had seen Talleyrand.

Noël Schoudler looked at him with some emotion.

"Perhaps I shall never see him again," he thought. "Indeed, I should never have undertaken this journey. If he dies while I'm away, I shall never forgive myself. Or perhaps I shan't return myself." Instinctively he put his hand to his heart.

This giant with a potentate's authority was afflicted with a secret disease, which he concealed behind a pretended angina: anxiety in all its forms, up to and including fear. A single aeroplane flying over the capital during the war was enough to make him feel weak at the knees. At sixty-six he still winced at the sight of blood. He was terrified in a motor-car and, nearly every night, he had to sleep with the light on. He had finally succeeded in persuading himself that his heart was diseased. Only the spectacle of his father, upright still at nearly a hundred, could give him reassurance. And this was the real reason for the tenderness he showed towards the old man, and for the consideration which he insisted on the whole household's extending to him.

But today, his bags packed, and all arrangements made for an absence of eight weeks, his imagination—the very imagination which served him so well in business and made him so redoubtable a negotiator—evoked for Noël Schoudler a sea-disaster like that of the *Titanic*, or again his own body sliding over the side wrapped in a white sheet.

"It's not the season for icebergs yet, is it?" he asked at random.

Then, a moment later, placing his hand on François's shoulder, he said: "Of course, you ought really to be going on this journey instead of me. America's a young country, it would have been more in keeping."

"Not at all, Papa, it'll do you good, you'll see. It's years now since you've been away."

"It may not be very wise with a heart like mine."

Jean-Noël was still fidgeting about at the end of the room. He wondered if he might not have done some damage behind the mysterious knob. It had made the same sort of noise that the springs of toys make when one overwinds them.

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"From one point of view," Noël went on, still addressing himself to François, "it may be a good thing. They'll begin to get accustomed to the fact that it's you who are in charge at the newspaper and the bank. But your grandfather's quite right; what one needs is guts! And when you've led men and risked your life for four years, it ought at least to serve some useful purpose."

These were nothing but words to fill in time before leaving for the station. But, at those moments, when he needed to reassure himself, Noël Schoudler liked to remember the brilliance of François's war, and his three mentions in despatches, as if the son's courage were enough for two. It also went to prove that the Schoudlers "always came out of things well."

"And that reminds me that your Legion of Honour hasn't come through yet," he added. "It's ridiculous. I'll shake Rousseau up as soon as I get back. Well, time's up; the women must be waiting for us."

With a sinking feeling of anxiety growing moment by moment in his extensive stomach, he leaned over the stool, brushing his black beard against the long white whiskers.

"Goodbye, my boy," said the Patriarch. "Keep well. You're lucky; I'd like to be going with you."

Just as the giant was going out of the padded double doors, Jean-Noël, steeling himself to be brave, ran towards him and said: "I know what I want you to bring me back from the other world, Grandfather: a toy train!"

III

When the Ministry fell, all the members of Anatole Rousseau's office had themselves put on the Minister's patronage list, one for a Sub-Prefecture, another for a decoration, a soldier here for some diplomatic post, and a civilian there for the curatorship of the War Museum. The last days, supposed to be devoted to bringing current matters up to date, were in fact taken up with the organization of everyone's private affairs. Rousseau, who had loyalties to maintain, signed, on the eve of the passing of his power, a whole batch of recommendations.

Simon Lachaume had no idea what he was going to do; he had no immediate and precise plans, merely a negative ambition: not to return to teaching. The idea of going back to the fourth form at Louis-le-Grand was intolerable to him. And the professorship which, thanks to his thesis and the strings he could pull, he had successfully canvassed in a provincial university, did not tempt him. The ten months he had spent in office, though completely useless both to the country and himself, had nevertheless given him a taste for political intrigue and an illusion of power. Henceforward he was lost to the vocation of educating youth. Anatole Rousseau agreed with him.

"A young fellow like you has better things to do than to cram declensions into brats," he said. "Put yourself in cold storage, my dear Lachaume. We shall soon be back in office again. And when that happens, whether they like it or not, in the normal course of events I shall be Prime Minister. It will be *my* Ministry."

Simon stayed seconded from the university under the pretext of doing some vague form of historical research, while still continuing to draw his salary; and, during the interregnum, engaged in journalism.

He was known to *L'Echo du Matin*. In the absence of Noël Schoudler, Simon made friends with his son. The latter had great plans of which he told Simon.

"I want to dust some of the cobwebs from the old business," said François Schoudler at their third meeting, "bring something youthful to it, make the greatest possible use of the opportunities of our time. We're pretty much the same age, so you'll understand what I mean. We've got photography, we've got speed in the transmission of news. A newspaper today must have immediate and direct means of communication with all the capitals of the world, know exactly what's going on everywhere. The public today wants coverage: concise, complete and exact information."

He waved out his match with a wide sweep of his arm and threw it with precision into the ashtray. He had assurance, faith, and the enthusiasm of youthful strength. "It's true to say," thought Simon, "that to be born rich is a good springboard! You gain ten years by it, the ten important years."

"And then there's the question of news of human-interest which makes the reader feel that he's personally concerned in what has happened," François Schoudler continued. "Well, here we take too much time about it in my opinion, we write *belles-lettres*, there's no human interest in them. Old Muller, the editor-in-chief, is a nice chap, but he belongs to another age. When my father comes back, we shall alter all that. I've also got an idea for a weekly that will revolutionize the periodical press. In the meantime, my dear chap, we'd like to have anything you'd care to write for us. Listen, what about an enquiry into 'Public Opinion, 1922,' what it wants, what it hopes for, where it gets its information? Think about it. It might help our ideas a lot."

Simon, who a year earlier had thought of nothing but literary contributions, approved these ideas and saw a secondary career opening before him in journalism proper.

"Public opinion," he said to himself, "is one of the stepping-stones to power, and it wouldn't be at all a bad idea if I could make some impact on it while I'm waiting for *us* to return to power. It would be a good string to my bow."

Having loyally associated himself with his Minister's fortunes, he had borrowed from him the *us* which he proudly repeated.

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On a certain Thursday at about this time, Simon, at Lartois's invitation, went to the Academy. "Poor Daumières," having at last kept his word, had died without being received beneath the dome; Lartois had immediately stood for the vacant seat which he had already canvassed the year before. This was the day of the election.

"I'm ashamed," Lartois said, "to inflict this task on you, my dear Simon; taking advantage of your youth and the friendship I bear you. But never fear; you won't be in the same position as the vizier whose head was cut off when he brought bad news. I am only putting myself forward as a candidate because I owe it to myself and believe that I have a right to the seat. If the gentlemen don't honour their promise, that'll be the end of it."

At three o'clock Simon therefore found himself in the little interior courtyard of the Academy, in the company of some fifteen journalists who were there professionally to await the results, and half a dozen idlers including Madame Polant, who never missed occasions of the kind. A March wind, sweeping along the ground, froze their ankles. There was not much conversation among the little crowd and most of it in low voices.

One by one the Academicians arrived, short-winded or trotting across the big cobbles like so many rats, or clutching the arms of servants who half-carried them. A few of the more lively ones handled their walking-sticks bravely. Two or three, aware of the value of publicity, greeted the journalists before entering the door which led into the Assembly Room.

Madame Polant, who knew them all by name, pointed them out to Simon.

"That's François de Curel," she said. "He's grown a lot older since last time. Ah, there's Anatole France with Robert de Flers. Boylesve was much in favour of Daumières; I don't know what he'll do today."

When Jérôme Barrère, a pot-bellied historian with a spreading beard, who was the principal supporter of Lartois's candidature, appeared, a journalist went up to him to get an interview.

"I know nothing, nothing," cried the historian, waving swollen black-nailed fingers above his head. And he disappeared into the building.

They waited sadly in the grey courtyard. Simon walked up and down. He noticed a tall, pale young man of about twenty-five, but dressed as if he were fifty, who was also walking to and fro across the cobbles. The tall young man seemed nervous, bit his glove, and kept looking at the clock.

"I don't think we shall know the results for half an hour," he suddenly said to Simon. "On whose behalf are you here?"

"I'm a friend of Professor Lartois," said Simon.

"Oh!" said the tall young man with a bitter glance. "I'm Baron Pingaud's son."

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From that moment they talked no more and looked on each other as enemies.

At last, about a quarter to four, a little man with a pointed beard, who was secretary to the Academy, appeared at the door and everyone crowded round him. In a harsh, barely intelligible voice he gave the results of the first ballot. Professor Lartois came first with fourteen votes; then, very close behind, Baron Pingaud with twelve; the poet Arthus Blondel received four votes out of thirty.

Simon rushed off to a little bar in the Rue Mazarine to telephone, followed by young Pingaud, who ran less fast; the tip of his nose was pale with emotion.

All this time Émile Lartois had been waiting in his study in the Avenue d'Iéna; unable to keep still or concentrate his attention, he constantly moved from one chair to another and from his bookshelves to his desk.

"I've drunk too much coffee," he said to himself. "I should not have drunk coffee today. Anyhow, Martha makes it much too strong. I've told her twenty times if I've told her once. Whatever one may say, living alone is melancholy. The cook, the secretary; the secretary, the cook; that's all my household consists of. In the normal way Pingaud ought to have no more than nine votes and I ought to be elected the first time. When will the installation take place? June, I suppose. A brief eulogy of Daumières, for really I owe him nothing. And since he had no time to take his seat, I shall make an immediate transition: 'This eminent writer of prose, this sensitive spirit whom you have done me the honour, gentlemen, of electing me to succeed, would have been more worthy than I to analyse the work of the great poet...' And I shall immediately pass to La Monnerie. Roughly, like this... 'I see him once again, gentlemen, lying on that bed where in friendship I attended him up to the last moment of his life...'"

At this moment the telephone rang. Lartois rushed to it, shaking out the twisted flex with a nervous gesture.

"Hullo! Is that you, Simon?" he cried. "How many? Fourteen! And Baron Pingaud twelve! It's thought they'll take the vote three times?... No, my dear chap, no, it's not as good as all that!... Yes, I know it's very kind of you, but what's going to happen to the votes Blondel controls; who are they going to be given to? My opponents will most certainly try to recapture them; you can be sure of that. And I've got some promised that will fail me, afraid of seeing me head the list. It would almost have been better if I'd been second, I assure you... Yes, that's it, go back there!"

He hung up the receiver and put his hands to his forehead.

"Ah," he thought, "Barrère was right. Pingaud's candidature coming at the last moment like that was a nasty blow. The left wing know what they're doing; they select a Baron, it's clever of them! I shall

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keep Barrère with seven, no eight faithfuls. The two dukes . . . Oh, I don't know, both the dukes are pretty wet, one never knows what they're up to."

And for the twentieth time since morning he counted up the absolutely sure votes, the sure votes and the half-sure votes.

The cook came in, asking whether she should put out the Madeira glasses and lay the tea as she had last time.

"No, certainly not, Martha!" cried Lartois. "You saw how unlucky those preparations were."

"Yes, but even when Monsieur is defeated, a lot of friends come in," the cook replied.

"All right! We'll see later, at the last minute."

And he went back to calculating the probabilities. How slowly the time went! Only five minutes since Simon had telephoned. "Anyway, if it were I who had twelve votes and that fool Pingaud fourteen, I should be in a far worse state," he said to reassure himself. "Come to think of it, fourteen, four and one makes five, it's a lucky number. Yes, but twelve, two and one makes three, which is better. If I walk round my carpet in fourteen paces, I shall be elected. One . . . two . . . three . . ."

Suddenly he caught sight of himself in the looking-glass as he was striding about the room.

"I'm making an ass of myself."

He stopped and went to his bedroom to get a Greek Testament. It was his bedside book. Every night before going to sleep he read a few verses, to keep his brain working, he said, and when he came to the end of St John, that is to say about once every two years, he began all over again.

But this afternoon Greek had no calming effect on him. He read two or three lines and then began thinking: "It must be going on at this moment. Perhaps it's already over. Perhaps I'm already defeated. Old age won't be so funny after all!" He hadn't even got an old-established mistress, some durable female affection. "I was untrue to the lot of them," he thought, "and there it is!" Then, assailed once more by his obsession, he said, and his lips moved as he said it: "When I think that I've seen at least fifteen of them naked, and that I've only got fourteen votes! Who was the fifteenth?" Thinking of all the bodies he had seen, the rounded backs with black traces of old spots, the fat bellies expanding above white and thinning pubic hair, he searched for the traitor.

The telephone rang again.

"Hullo, Lachaume?" Lartois cried. "Oh, I'm sorry, my dear friend. Yes, I was waiting for a call . . . Yes, that's it . . . Not too badly. Fourteen votes the first time . . . Yes . . . yes . . ."

He felt impatient and his legs were shaking. What business had this

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idiot woman to telephone him at a moment like this? He forgot that he had half-raped her in a cab two nights ago. She talked interminably.

"Yes . . . all right, take one tablet; that's it! Forgive me, dear, I'm called away."

He hung up. Almost at once the bell rang again.

"Hullo! Yes! What? Really?" cried Lartois. "How many votes? Nineteen. What about Pingaud? Ten. Ah! Thank you, my dear Simon, thank you very much! That's splendid, quite splendid! Yes, come round at once, I'm awaiting you."

He threw himself into a chair, his brow feverish, his heart beating and his vision clouded.

"Oh, how happy I am!" he murmured to himself. "How very happy! Such happiness must add ten years to one's life."

Then, as the wish to tell someone about it came over him, he rushed to the door of his study.

"Martha! Martha!" he cried. "Put the tea and the Madeira ready. I've been elected!"

"Well, I'm very pleased for you, sir," the cook replied. "You did want it that bad!"

When Simon, who had jumped into a taxi, arrived, Lartois said: "I shall never forget, my dear fellow, what you've done for me."

He then succeeded in regaining some sort of control, since friends were arriving full of compliments.

Madame Éterlin, forewarned by Simon, was one of the first, followed immediately by Jérôme Barrère. The historian entered, his beard flowing, with a noise like an earthquake.

"Lartois, you're one of us!" he shouted, claspng the new Academician to his stomach. "It was epic, my dear fellow, positively epic! I fought for you like a lion, like Turenne. And as for Baron Penguin, we simply sent him to the North Pole!"

However hard Lartois tried to preserve his equanimity, to appear to be receiving his new honour with serene modesty, his face shone with pride; happiness sparkled in his eyes.

All the chattering women who were invading his flat seemed to him young, pretty and desirable, all the men intelligent, loyal and devoted.

"Dear Maître, waiting for the results must be utterly nerve-racking!" said Inès Sandoval, the poetess.

"My dear lady, the day of my election I behaved like a madman," said the historian, who was cramming biscuits into his mouth. "I scolded my wife and children, I was beside myself. It really is something, you know!"

One might have thought that they were a lot of schoolboys discussing an examination. Their last competitive effort was for immortality and they were able to cry "Passed!" with all the excitement of adolescence.

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His friends and flatterers, to please Noël, complimented him ceaselessly on his son.

"Yes, yes, François's all right, I'm proud of him," he replied. "Moreover, I've brought him up in the way he should go, as my father did for me. I have passed on the Schoudler principles."

And his eyes narrowed still further beneath their puffy eyelids, till one felt one was speaking to a fortress.

The giant was becoming more morose from day to day, more moodily harsher; he realized it but did not understand why. "The journey must have tired me," he thought. He kept on feeling that people respected him less; he gazed at himself in looking-glasses.

The conflict came to a head on the newspaper, and over a comparatively unimportant matter: Simon Lachaume. The principal leader-writer on foreign politics had died, and François took the opportunity to suggest Simon should take his place.

"What are the politics of this Lachaume of yours?" asked Noël, at once ill-disposed. "With Rousseau? Yes, all right. How old is he? Thirty-three?"

He banged the desk with his fist, crying: "A child! Still an absolute child! If I let you do it, the office'll become a nursery!"

"But what age was old Bonnétang when you made him Foreign Editor?" replied François, annoyed.

"Old Bonnétang, as you call him, was my age! That's to say, at that time . . ."

Noël Schoudler realized he was skating on thin ice, since Bonnétang had been writing for *L'Echo du Matin* for thirty years. The giant tried to get out of it by shouting.

"What's more, Bonnétang knew his job! Besides, I'm still the boss here, by God! And when I say no, I mean no!"

"Of course you're the boss," François replied calmly.

"It doesn't seem all that obvious to me!" cried Noël. "It's 'Monsieur François' here, 'Monsieur François' there. 'Monsieur François' has a plan for the paper; 'Monsieur François' would like to build a new bank; 'Monsieur François' has a father and grandfather who have worked and struggled and fought like dogs for seventy years to make him what he is . . ."

He was losing his self-control. His words were issuing from his mouth like black handkerchiefs from the mouth of a conjurer. He was unaware of the presence of the Editor-in-Chief, or rather he made use of it to wound his son, even if he had to wound himself in the process. He was becoming coarse both in voice and meaning . . .

"... and 'Monsieur François' who knows nothing about anything, for you know nothing at all, see! Merely because he has been a little whipper-snapper of a cavalry captain, wearing boots paid for by his father, a Croix de Guerre paid for by father too like all the rest . . ."

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"That I won't allow!" cried François. "I suppose you paid for my wound too? We didn't go and get wounded while you ran off to Bordeaux like a pack of cowards so as to . . ."

"Shut up!" yelled the giant.

His eyes were staring and flecked with red veins. His voice reached beyond the padded doors to the secretaries' office.

The Editor-in-Chief, extremely embarrassed at being present at such a scene, intervened mildly.

"Listen, sir," he said.

"And you shut up too, Muller," shouted Noël Schoudler, "or I'll sack you into the bargain. From now on I absolutely forbid my son to give any order on the paper whatever; do you hear what I'm saying? Any whatever! He's to have nothing to do with it from now on. He can go off and amuse himself with his regattas and his hunting on the money that I and you, Muller, and the whole damned paper make for him! But the paper's not a toy and I'm not yet in my second childhood. You can damned well wait till I'm dead before you destroy my life's work!"

He could hear his heart beating like a ship's engine. He remembered his angina, and immediately stopped shouting.

"And perhaps you won't have all that long to wait," he said in a voice that sounded suddenly muffled. "Go on! Go away! Get out, François! Get out! For God's sake go away!"

As a result of his anger he was gasping for breath, and now economized his words, putting his hand to his heart.

"And this is the result," he added, "this . . ."

He lay down, huge, on the leather settee, undid his collar, and sent for Lartois who declared, when he had sounded his chest, that his heart was a young man's and that all that was wrong was a little overwork.

v

Noël Schoudler's rages were always like the charges of a startled pachyderm and he never forgave the bush that moved. The following morning, after an hour's conversation with the Patriarch in the study with the green-leather walls, he sent for François.

"My boy," he said, "I've thought a lot since yesterday. I think we shall have to organize our work differently."

He was perfectly calm and somewhat grave.

"If it's to have frequent scenes like the one we had yesterday in front of Muller," said François coldly, "I'd much rather, Father, that we didn't organize it at all, and that I went into some business other than yours."

"Listen, don't let's get angry and talk nonsense. In the first place, it's not a question of *my* business, it's all Schoudler business," replied

Noël, indicating both his father and his son with an inclusive gesture "And a Baron Schoudler does not go out and find a job. Particularly at a time when the years are beginning to tell on me, you know. What ever Lartois may say, I'm beginning to fail, I know it. My angel yesterday is a proof of it. You mustn't hold it against me. I didn't know what I was saying any more; I ask you to forget it, my boy."

However unjustified they might be, Noël Schoudler was not in the habit of apologizing for his rages. François really thought his father was failing. This sign of feebleness, of age, this crack in the monolith, pained him. The giant, playing his part to perfection, sat leaning rather forward in his chair, his huge hands extended in a gesture of peace.

"Don't let's talk of it any more, Father, it's of no consequence," said François. And to conceal his emotion, he took out a cigarette and extinguished the match with his usual wide gesture.

The Patriarch, sitting on his stool, was silent, looking at François with the suspicious expression of an old sphinx.

"Listen, François, this is how I see it," continued Noël; "I think we must divide the work between us. Then there won't be any collisions. I shall continue to manage the Bank . . ."

"And hand the paper over to me?" said François excitedly.

"No," replied Noël, and his expression hardened.

François realized that his father would have more willingly ceded him a mistress than the management of the *Echo*.

"In any case, not immediately," went on Noël more gently. "What I'd like you to take over now are the sugar-refineries at Sonchelles. As you have said yourself, it's a first-class business, but it needs completely modernizing. I no longer have the energy to undertake it. Well, we propose giving you a free hand. From now on you're the boss at Sonchelles. I've convinced your grandfather and he's in complete agreement. At the next board meeting you'll receive the same powers that were given me . . ."

He went over to one of the mahogany filing-cabinets, took out a fat file marked "Sugar Refineries," searched among the documents, the factory plans, deeds decorated with designs of the period of Napoleon III, and cuttings from financial journals.

"Why does Grandfather look at me like that?" François wondered, feeling the empurpled eyes fixed constantly on him.

" . . . that were given me, you see, exactly twenty-nine years ago," went on Noël. "Three years after you were born."

It seemed like yesterday to Noël Schoudler. Yet those twenty-nine years had turned an infant in long clothes into the man who now stood before him with the roots of his beard slightly blue on his shaven cheeks, and that affected, irritating way he had of extinguishing matches, a stranger whom he was compelled to take into account simply because the stranger was of his own blood.

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François, fiddling with the file, suddenly saw his grandfather's long faded signature, ending with the complicated flourish of a prudent man, and the thick signature of his father with the Christian name widely separated from the surname; his own signature would soon be added to them.

At length the Patriarch spoke.

"They're important, you know, the sugar-refineries," he said. "That man"—and his veined hand indicated the portrait of the first Baron Schoudler in court dress—"whose shoes . . . humph . . . we are none of us worthy to unlatch, predicted it long before 1850 . . . '*Die Banken, der Zucker, und die Presse, das ist die Zukunft*' . . . humph . . . We have always profited by his advice."

Noël closed the big file and handed it to François.

"Here, my boy, take this away," he said, "and start work on it. A free hand, you've got a free hand."

The sugar-refineries were not what he had dreamed of, but the mere fact of having responsibility of his own consoled him. Above all he was astonished that his father should have consented so easily and so spontaneously to this first handing over of power.

"He realizes he's getting older," he thought, "and that from now on I'm the family's strength . . ."

When he had closed the padded doors, the giant and the Patriarch gazed at each other lengthily. They had forgotten the time, which had lasted several years, when they had treated each other as adversaries while working side by side, riveted to the same chain of wealth. They were now two allies against the impatience of their descendant.

"I'm just waiting for the moment when the capital has to be increased," said Noël. "We've made life too easy for François. He's in need of a good lesson. It would be better for us to administer it, rather than leave it to life to do so."

VI

Married in 1914, somewhat against the will of the La Monneries, who had not considered the match, however wealthy it might be, peculiarly brilliant, nor the moment particularly well-chosen, Jacqueline Schoudler had enjoyed a real married life only since the end of the war, that is to say three years in all. And every day of those three years she congratulated herself on having been sufficiently determined to impose her marriage on them. Those who imagined that she had married for money, or that the Schoudler son wished to add ancient lineage to the banker's gold of his Austrian armorial bearings were equally wrong. Their marriage had been for love and continued to be so. Jacqueline loved everything about François, his rather massive frame, his physical courage, his sense of honour, his moments of great enthusiasm whenever he undertook some new thing, his sudden moments of depression

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in face of small difficulties which merely went to prove that he took life seriously; she loved even his occasional bad manners, a certain casualness in speech and gesture, that she smilingly accepted as proof of his wholly masculine temperament.

She was sorry that François had already become a business man; she came from a class of society where the possession of great wealth did not seem to require so much concentration.

Having received his appointment of managing director of the sugar-refineries of Sonchelles, François had immediately got down to his job. He travelled ceaselessly between Paris and the Pas-de-Calais, interviewing engineers and architects, organizing the drawing-up of plans for new buildings, ordering new machinery from America, and studying the history of the production of beet-sugar from the middle of the preceding century. At the same time he had set the financial journalists going and thought himself extremely clever to have succeeded in raising the value of the Sonchelles shares by several points on the Bourse. Never had the refineries possessed so enterprising a director.

"I'm building baths and a football-ground for the workers," François told Jacqueline. "They like me a lot, you know. I'd like to show you round, darling. I held a meeting of all the workers the other day; I talked to them..."

Jacqueline was used to hearing these continual "I... I said... I intend...", but she realized that the journey to Scotland, which was planned for the summer, was becoming more uncertain every day, and that she would undoubtedly end up at Deauville with the children because it would be more convenient for François. She consoled herself with the fact that he seemed happy. She was only afraid he might over-tire himself. Their rooms were adjoining, and the communicating door was always left open. François sometimes got up in the middle of the night to make a note of some idea. Then he would whisper: "Are you asleep?"

If Jacqueline answered, he came to her to tell her about his latest brainwave. He always needed to clarify his thought in speech.

He was going to set up a vertical trust, buy a paper-mill for his packing, acquire his own printing-press, bring out his own weekly paper, and stand for election with a whole series of social reforms. His blue cardboard files seemed to be overflowing with enough plans to fill the lives of four ordinary men, and from time to time the thought occurred to him: "I'm one of the leading men of my generation."

At every new initiative of his son's concerning the refineries, Noël Schoudler said: "You've got a free hand, a free hand. I've absolute confidence in you."

And he was partly sincere: industrial technique held no interest for him. He liked to fight his battles on the financial plane. Nevertheless,

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he suffered; he longed to resume the authority he had pretended to relinquish.

The moment for increasing the capital, which he had long foreseen, arrived; François's capital outlay now made it urgent.

Noël declared that he could subscribe only an infinitesimal part of it.

François was staggered.

"But you really can't allow us to lose the controlling interest in Sonchelles at the moment the turnover's about to soar," he cried. "The profits will double themselves . . ."

"Very well then, don't let's expand," said Noël calmly.

"That's quite impossible. The work's in hand!"

"My dear boy, if you've been rash," said Noël, "that's more serious. A big business, you know, is really just as simple as an innkeeper's accounts. One simply does not go to market without knowing where the money's coming from."

"But I've always thought that the expansion was accepted and understood."

"In business," Noël said sententiously, "you'll learn that one must not think, one must be sure. Birds in the bush are unforgivable in business."

His eyes half-closed, he became obstinate in his opposition, talking of devaluation, the economic crisis, the flight of capital, the trust his customers reposed in him, indeed every banker's reason.

François was considerably disturbed. The cash position at Sonchelles would cover current outgoings but no more.

"I've got myself into a pretty fix," thought François. He started blaming himself aloud. Well, perhaps he had moved a little too fast, gone ahead too rapidly. But he thought that he was being supported. He had been given a free hand.

"All the more reason to go carefully!" cried Noël Schoudler, pretending to be angry. "Besides, it's my fault. You wanted to be in charge. I yielded; I thought that you were capable of managing a big business on your own. You've behaved like a child, as my most junior bank-clerk would have hesitated to do. It's madness, madness on my part!"

As he spoke, his anger took shape.

"And if we lose Sonchelles because of you," he shouted, "you can be proud of yourself! It's the sort of folly that might kill both your grandfather and myself at a single blow. And a pretty lookout that would be for you! I wouldn't give you five years before you're bankrupt! I suppose I've got to make good your folly once again. You think you can do what the hell you like, don't you? Father's behind you, Father'll fix it! Well, I don't yet know what I'm going to do about it! I shall have to sell and at a loss. Sell what? We haven't got millions lying about just to cover your brilliant ideas! I shall have to find a

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syndicate to subscribe the capital. That's all I can do. A splendid position, isn't it?"

François was aghast.

"The fact is, you oughtn't to have given me the refineries," he said. "I'm not really suited to industry."

"The first sensible thing I've heard you say since you were born. Go away, I can't stand the sight of you. Get out!"

When he was alone once more, Noël thought: "Supposing it were true, supposing we were really to lose Sonchelles..."

He was persuaded that his grievances against his son were well-founded. Luckily he had foreseen all this from the day he had decided to divide their responsibilities. He congratulated himself on having seen things so clearly.

"I knew he wasn't up to it..." he said to himself.

He sent for Lucien Maublanc.

VII

The Baronne Schoudler, Adèle, wearing a pearl-grey dress with a half-length veil, was about to go out when she found herself face to face in the hall with her first husband, Lucien Maublanc. She had not seen him for five years, and it was ten since they had spoken to each other; the annulment of their marriage dated back some thirty-five years. It was as if a dead man were coming towards her, one of the utterly dead: the dead whom one has buried in the extreme depths of one's own mind.

"Your new husband has asked me to call on him," he said, bowing his deformed forehead over her extended hand.

Baronne Schoudler had hideous memories, which time had partly effaced, of her six months' marriage with Maublanc; and the relentless skeleton of her hatred still lay in the ignominious shroud of her wedding night.

That thick, coarse voice, issuing from the corner of his mouth, always so sardonic in intent, uncovered things she had tried to forget and she really felt as if she were touching the fingers and the lips of a rotting corpse.

"You still have slender ankles," he went on. "Are you happy, my dear?"

"Very!" she replied tartly.

And she moved on towards the glass door. "Why on earth has Noël asked him to call?" she wondered.

She went on her way tortured by a dread foreboding, as if the embodiment of ill-luck had entered the house.

Noël Schoudler was waiting for Maublanc in the green study. They had known and loathed each other since their youth.

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That particular afternoon the giant was even more decided of speech and expansive of gesture than usual.

"I can't stand him," thought Lulu. "He's eight years older than I am and never seems to age, the swine."

The Patriarch was present, installed for once in a Louis XIII armchair, upholstered in tapestry.

"Father, you remember my friend Maublanc?" Noël said loudly.

"Yes, yes, very well," the Patriarch replied. "He was your wife's first husband, wasn't he? It was in 1850 . . . no . . . I mean 1887 . . . Ah, you see . . . humph . . . what a good memory I have!"

Noël made his visitor sit down, gave him coffee, a glass of brandy, and a good cigar. The Patriarch was drinking his yellow Chartreuse in little sips; the alcohol seemed to swell his cheeks, like an old sponge expanding in water.

Lulu wondered what these preparations meant and was on his guard.

"You don't know my grandchildren, who are also your half-great-nephews?" asked Noël, underlining the relationship between Lulu and François's wife.

"No, I haven't the pleasure," said Lulu.

On the house-telephone Noël sent for Jean-Noël and Marie-Ange. They came down. Noël made them kiss the man with the hideous forehead and enormous tie. Lulu disliked it as much as the children did.

"How do you do, how do you do?" said Lulu. "They're charming children, yes, very charming. And what do you want to be when you grow up?" he asked Jean-Noël.

"I want to be a man of forty," the little boy replied gravely.

"He'll be a Schoudler, that's what he'll be," said the giant, patting his head.

Marie-Ange suddenly made a little sign to her brother and both of them, more prepared to be frightened than to laugh, gazed at the Patriarch. Old Siegfried was in process of finishing his Chartreuse, and as his nose was huge and the little gold-engraved glass extremely small, he was finding it difficult to pour the last of the liqueur down his throat; to lick up the dregs, he protruded a thick, curving, violet tongue, that moved slowly within the transparent bell, filling it, making of it a sort of blood-gorged leech on the point of bursting.

When Noël thought that he had teased Lulu sufficiently by flaunting his descendants, when he sensed that he had made him as ill-disposed as possible, he sent the children away.

"I wanted to talk to you about the sugar-refineries at Sonchelles," he said.

"Ah, this is it," thought Lulu. "Take care! Where's the trap?"

"Your son's running it these days," he said.

Noël began boasting of François's abilities. "A remarkably active young man with modern ideas." François was in process of reorganizing

the business, he had undertaken a huge programme of expansion, the profits would be doubled.

"Yes, quite admirable," said Lulu, his cigar clenched between his teeth.

"You've got a considerable holding in Sonchelles, I believe," said Noël, "and so have your nephews of the Leroy Bank."

"What does he want? The figures? He must have them," thought Lulu as he took a sip of brandy to give himself time to think.

"He's got some plan in mind and he wants me to sell him my shares. Nothing doing. The mere fact that I've got them makes him furious."

"Yes, we've got a few," he replied, putting down his glass.

"We've got to introduce new capital at once," Noël said.

"Yes, I see."

As always, when he thought people wanted something of him, Lulu answered in monosyllables, letting his opponents talk on, acting the part of a man who does not quite understand, and taking his pleasure—as operative over a question of two hundred francs for a girl as over the intricacies of high finance—from the embarrassment people necessarily have in expressing their wishes or their difficulties.

Today, however, he did not as yet understand the position. In an attempt to pierce Noël's thought, he asked: "Exactly what is the process of introducing new capital?"

"Ah, you're going to play the simpleton, are you?" Noël Schoudler thought. "All right then, let's get down to it!"

And pretending to play the other's game, he detailed the mechanics of the operation that Lulu already knew perfectly well. The nominal capital of Sonchelles had consisted, at the formation of the company in 1857, of fifty million—an enormous sum at that time—divided into five hundred thousand shares of a hundred francs each.

"Sonchelles rates today . . . well, you must have seen the opening prices . . ." Noël said.

"No, I didn't see them," Lulu replied.

"Two thousand and twenty-five," Noël went on. "Let's say two thousand to make things simpler. Therefore the business is worth today over a thousand million. We have decided to increase the nominal capital from fifty to seventy-five million by offering a bonus share to every holder of two original ones."

The subscription price of the new issue being fixed at five hundred francs, it was in fact not twenty-five but a hundred and twenty-five millions that would accrue to the business.

"If you happen to have—and I'm taking a figure at random—two thousand Sonchelles shares . . ." Noël went on.

"Twelve thousand, and you know it very well," thought Lulu, who had already made the calculation and had realized that the outlay on the shares that would be offered him would amount to four million.

" . . . you'll be offered the chance of subscribing a thousand. So each

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new share, for which you will pay five hundred francs, is worth theoretically, on the day of issue, the average price of three shares; the two original ones at two thousand make four thousand, plus the new one at five hundred, that's four thousand five hundred divided by three, which is fifteen hundred francs. You follow me?"

"Yes, yes, very well."

But Lulu still could not see what the other was driving at; until the moment came when the giant allowed it to be understood, with every sort of reticence and circumlocution, that he was himself in some difficulty in subscribing the new shares.

At first, Lulu Maublanc simply did not believe it: Schoudler, deciding on an increase of capital, without being able to take up his own share? It was simply not true. But then the giant began producing the same reasons he had given François, but with a different approach. And Lulu heard an orchestra within his mind playing a tune he recognized as the *Valse Hongroise*. The tune repeated itself, became louder and louder, wilder and wilder: a song of triumph. He only just managed not to hum it while Noël was talking.

For a third of a century Lulu had hoped for, sought for, this moment, a third of a century in which he had ceaselessly said to himself that "those Schoudler bandits, those Schoudler swine" were expanding too quickly, were continually engaged in hazardous operations, and that their way of life, their entertaining, would ruin them, that they would end "by breaking their necks," and on that day he, Lucien Maublanc, would be there to see it. Often during the last thirty years Lulu, playing the Bourse with his enormous resources, had attempted to put a spoke in the Schoudler wheel. At the time of the Panama scandal he had thought to succeed. But he had to admit that, on each occasion, to use his own words, "he had left some tail-feathers behind him."

The hour of revenge was at hand. If Noël had been forced to admit what he had just admitted, it must mean that the situation was four times more serious. It was all perfectly obvious: the assured tone of voice, the sentimental production of the children to play their part, as if it were suddenly remembered that Lulu was a member of the family, the 1811 brandy, the presence of the Patriarch, whose siesta-hour it was, and who was now dozing in his chair.

Noël, as he watched the delighted expression illuminating that deformed face, explained that he naturally wanted a group of friends to subscribe in his place for an allocation to be defined at a later date.

"What an idiot to put his head in the lion's jaws," Lulu said to himself. "Or perhaps it may be that they already have no other resource. It must be that: the son has been foolish; they've all been foolish. Son-chelles is insolvent and they don't know where to turn."

"Well, would you be prepared to take up part of it?" Noël asked finally.

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"How many would you let me have?" asked Lulu.

He needed to know this precisely so as to be quite sure. As in many old-established businesses with widely spread shareholdings, the control remained in the hands of the owners of a comparatively small proportion of the total capital, thirteen per cent in this case. If the Schoudlers' holdings were brought down below twelve per cent, they would lose the control of the refinery, and this would be decided by the allocation of some ten thousand shares. Noël replied: "Fourteen thousand."

Lulu gazed at his feet to conceal his delight. He let a good minute go by in silence. He had not hoped for so much.

"If you had proposed this two months ago, it would have been easy," he said as he got up, "but the bottom's fallen out of precious stones and I'm in for a lot..."

It was an utter, an obvious lie. Owing to the inflation diamonds were, on the contrary, up.

"And what about your nephews of the Leroy Bank?" said Noël again.

"You'd better ask them."

When Lulu had gone, Noël rubbed his hands. "If everything goes off as I foresee, it's one of the greatest coups of my career," he said to himself. "This business is going to cost him millions. And if the Leroy's are such fools as to come in..."

He poured himself out a little more of the 1811 brandy and clicked his tongue. At the sound, the Patriarch woke up and opened his purple eyelids.

"Did it go off as you hoped?" he asked.

"Precisely," Noël replied.

"When I tell François about this," he thought, "it'll be a lesson to him! I hope he'll realize that life does not consist of installing baths for workmen."

In the meantime Lulu Maublanc was walking down the Avenue de Messine, swinging his gold-headed cane and whistling the *Valse Hongroise* rather flat.

VIII

His grey hair well smoothed down, his chin held high, Academician Émile Lartois was reading his first oration in a nasal voice. The heavy new gold lace gleamed on the close-fitting green uniform and the row of decorations. Lartois's left elbow touched the hilt of his sword. Sitting each side of him on the ill-upholstered benches were his sponsors, the historian Barrère and the Maréchal Joffre.

Though the clear brilliance of the end of June shone out of doors, beneath the dome there was a religious light; it was a church without stained-glass windows. A long sunbeam, piercing the dusty heights like an archangel's sword, touched a bishop's violet robe or the bald nudity of a somnolent skull.

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The attendance was honourable enough; but it was not the packed crowd of a great day. In the first place, the season was somewhat advanced. And then there exist, even within the gates of fame, as many graduations as there are between obscurity and success. There are merely fewer people on the rungs.

The public of Paris expected no fireworks in Émile Lartois's speech, nor, indeed, from the gentle Albert Moyau's reply.

After a certain age people with a reputation are compelled to respond to the opinion that is generally held of them, the pamphleteer with a pamphlet, the courteous man with courtesy; even the artist becomes a slave to his art in his old age.

This was why Émile Lartois, justifying his social reputation and no more, was emitting a series of well-turned sentences in his somewhat self-satisfied voice, and, from time to time, when he let fall some phrase borrowed from the language of medicine, he made a point of apologizing for it. And the grateful audience clucked politely.

Jérôme Barrère, his beard untidy as usual and his green uniform covered with stains, was happily cleaning the nails of his left hand with his right thumb.

In the front row of the gallery, in full sight of all, a young man with an enormous head, wearing a new suit, seemed to be as gratified to be there as was the new Academician. It was Simon Lachaume, representing his Minister, who was detained by a Committee of the Chamber. For, though the Government had not fallen since the beginning of the year, a reshuffle had presented Anatole Rousseau with his ninth appointment, and, for the fourth time, he was Minister of Education. Simon had been rewarded for his loyalty and now found himself deputy-chief of the office; he had become an extremely official personage and had replaced steel-rimmed spectacles with tortoiseshell ones. He was beginning to be talked about in Paris.

The public consisted mostly of women though among them were candidates who, defeated twice and sometimes three times but undiscouraged, had, through the very fact of their defeats, ended by feeling reasonably at home there. There were also a certain number of writers present who, since they were only in their early fifties, seemed still young. Ten years before, they had said that they would form no part of the Academy at any price, but had now come to sniff the dusty atmosphere of immortality and reconnoitre obstacles and prospects.

These future, persevering candidates carefully studied the faces of the Academicians and tried to determine which seats were likely to fall due in the immediate future.

"Poor Loti looks terrible, don't you think?" a novelist whispered to his neighbour in happy compassion.

And the thirty or so Immortals present, listening to their new colleague's speech, thought, as they watched the faces of their juniors on

the nearby benches: "Well well, the boys are flocking in. We'll show it's not quite so easy as all that!" For, before yielding their places, the old men wished to indulge in their favourite sport: it consisted in seeing the "field" of the next generation, its hair already greying at the temples, line up to race across Paris to the Academy like steeple-chasers on a racecourse.

Madame de La Monnerie, sitting with her daughter, the young Baroness Schoudler, and her niece Isabelle on the uncomfortable wooden benches, low down in the centre of the little arena, beside the widow Daumières and the friends of the new member, looked disapproving and displeased, because Lartois, in her opinion, talked in too low a voice and half his speech was inaudible to her.

"Yet, this man, the cup of whose life was overflowing," he read, "this husband, father, brother, this happy friend, this writer surrounded with adulation, loaded each year with new honours, was in spite of it all the poet of sorrow, because sorrow seemed to him to be the very essence of life. For Jean de La Monnerie the flight of time was a permanent theme for melancholy; the growth and decay of the individual were for him the perpetual mystery. Youth and joy are but deceivers because they are ephemeral, and God has given but minor blessings to man, since He has not given him, or has taken from him, eternity in which to enjoy them.

"For your illustrious colleague, as for Alphonse de Lamartine, to whom his work is related in more ways than one—has not a recent volume of profound criticism presented Jean de La Monnerie as belonging to the fourth generation of the romantics—"

Simon Lachaume felt himself blushing with pleasure, for it was his thesis which was being referred to; Lartois was returning him the compliment he had paid in his obituary. And Isabelle raised her eyes towards Simon, but the latter did not notice.

"... for your illustrious colleague man was a fallen angel," continued Lartois. "But, in his view, the fall was not only original and specific; it took place every day. With what grief and with what precise understanding the poet elaborated every stage in that imperceptible decay of the senses and that contraction of hope! For fifty years Jean de La Monnerie watched the process of ageing in himself."

Lartois unhurriedly turned a page of his script and coughed.

"But the obsession with age, which if I may I will call a psychosis," he threw out in a clearer voice, "has at least this advantage for those who suffer from it: it masks the obsession with death by which others are oppressed."

Lartois paused, awaiting the cluckings of applause and the few "hear, hears" that should have acknowledged this sentiment, which he judged to be of the utmost psychological subtlety.

The audience responded with an appalling silence. Not a silence of

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indifference but of reprobation. It was a silence unbroken by a single cough or the rustle of a dress; a silence in which each member of the audience could hear the beating of his own heart. Lartois felt himself the cynosure of many disapproving eyes; even those of his sponsor, the historian with the dirty nails, who gazed at him with severity.

At a preliminary reading to a small group, the phrase had passed unnoticed. But here, declaimed in such a way as to make an effect on a large audience, it resounded in an unforeseen way and curiously overshot its mark.

There are things one does not say, or at least things one does not call by their right names; and to talk of an obsession with death to an assembly of bent old men and sunken-faced women was considered by everyone to be the solecism of a sawbones, more ill-judged even than an obscenity would have been.

They knew well enough how afraid they were! The essayist, who had the reputation of being Voltairean, who never went to sleep without saying his childhood prayers, the philosopher with the scurfy collar who took his temperature every night, Maurice Barrès who walked up and down for hours in his long pants exorcising his nocturnal horrors, and the dramatist with the five bottles of medicine lined up by his plate, of course they knew all about it, of course they knew about psychosis and obsessions! And their haste to shut a window at the least sign of a draught, their fear, when they went out for walks, of seeing priests in soutanes, magpies or empty hearses, their sudden sense of tears at a landscape, at the Tuileries garden, at a child playing with a hoop, at a pinnacle making its way down the Seine, at an ant dragging a straw, at almost anything, the constriction in the throat when they thought: "Soon I shall never see all this again!"—why should they be reminded of it? And why, in particular, at one of those rare moments when they ordinarily managed to forget it? For the beating drum that preceded their entry into the hall, the deference shown them, the envy with which they felt themselves surrounded, the fact of finding themselves one of the forty most illustrious people of the country which they still believed to be the foremost and most intelligent in the world, all these things veiled the prospect of oblivion. When the time for the pleasures of love has passed, the joys of pride can alone give man reassurance or, at least, occupy his attention.

No, no one ever admits to an obsession with death! And this reticence is not, as is supposed, a matter of dignity; it is above all concerned not to put to flight the help of others. The child, afraid of the moment when the light will be put out, persuades his mother that he wants a kiss out of love for her; the soldier, singing an obscene song at the railway-carriage window, is stifling the fear that screams within him as continuously as a disordered siren; the woman who nestles close to her sweating lover, and the old couple who continue to share a common

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bed name their fear love. No one, no one admits it, for fear that their avowal will isolate them like the plague-stricken, because the mother, the lover, the captain, are all frightened too! Civilizations, cities, emotions, arts, laws and armies are all the children of fear in its supreme and unique form, the fear of death.

This, more or less, was the geometric pattern in which the thoughts of the old men moved and crossed each other; and they were almost all professionals in the observation of human nature. They barely listened to the rest of the speech.

As for Lartois, he went on reading the words he had written, but no longer listened to himself enunciating them. The silent assembly seemed to reflect back on him the uneasiness he had caused it. Twice or thrice he stumbled over his words, since he was thinking: "What's the use of all this? And what am I doing here? Why, why? Was this what I wanted so much? Well, I've got it. I'm here! How vain it all is! All these diseases, so many diseases!" Such disillusion, now that he had achieved the long-hoped-for goal and was at last where he had so desired to be, was inexplicable.

The end of his speech was received with ritual applause, but the audience really relaxed only when the gentle Albert Moyau, adjusting his pince-nez, rose behind the rostrum and began speaking.

"Monsieur,

"The Vicomte de Chateaubriand, who occupied the chair to which we are proud to welcome you, wrote in his memoirs: 'When Hippocrates was alive, there was, so says the epigram, much room in Hell; thanks to his modern successors the space is crowded today.' Well, if Monsieur de Chateaubriand had known you, would he have revised his judgment? For my part, Monsieur, I believe he would..."

The galleries once again clucked their applause. Everyone felt better. And Lartois himself regained assurance as he heard the eulogy of his talents develop.

Albert Moyau lauded in his quavering voice a life of Laënnec, of which Lartois was the author, as a work of exceptional ability; he even mentioned the thesis for a doctorate on the ailments of the pylorus which was exhumed for the occasion and styled "an important contribution to the noble science of healing."

Lartois smoothed his grey hair with his delicate hand.

IX

Sadly he doffed his sword and uniform. He would have been happy to wear it for the rest of his life. To console himself, he calculated that, with an average of ten ceremonies a year, he would be able to wear his uniform at least a hundred times, or a hundred and twenty, perhaps

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even a hundred and fifty. His father had died at seventy-five and his mother at seventy-nine.

"You understand," he explained, as he sat down to dinner, to the dozen friends whom he had gathered in a private room at the Ritz and who were complimenting him once more on the elegance of his appearance (and it was above all on this aspect of his reception that the accounts in the evening papers dwelt: "Professor Lartois's pale-green uniform . . . Professor Lartois is the Brummel of the Academy . . ."). "You understand," he said, "that there were two possible courses open to me. Either I had to purchase the uniform of a deceased colleague . . ."

With what satisfaction he now used the term "colleague" for all the illustrious sons of France since Richelieu!

" . . . or order myself a new one. It is never very pleasant to wear other people's clothes unless they are intimate friends. Of course, if it had been poor Jean's uniform . . ." he went on, turning towards Madame Éterlin who, together with Simon, was among the guests. "But really, Jean and I were not built in the same mould. So I said to myself: 'To hell with economy! In terms of the Academy I'm a young man; let's buy a new uniform!' "

He was talking rather more loudly than was necessary, being unable to rid himself of the oratorical pitch he had adopted that afternoon.

Dinners to celebrate happy events, such as birthdays or New Year's Eve, are generally occasions of boredom. The winner of a prize at the Conservatoire, or of a tennis cup, or of the position of secretary to a Conference, or of a seat in Parliament or the Academy, can seldom spend his evening with the people he would like. He is always the victim of his social obligations and, surrounded by a few beaming faces, he, the victor, drinks his champagne while his thoughts are far away.

Or, alternatively, he chooses to invite everyone, his family, his in-laws, his wife, old friends who might otherwise be hurt, his mistress's husband, his new associates, but this is still worse! The party remains as cold as charity.

Lartois had not had to face this problem. His family consisted of one sister, an old spinster who lived at Provins and had seen no reason to leave home. He had neither wife nor children, and death had already relieved him of most of the friends of his youth. As for his recent mistresses, they had counted for little in his life during this period in which his one passion had been the Academy.

He had therefore every reason to enjoy his triumph in uncomplicated felicity. The talk was of nothing but himself, his speech, and the reply; and he felt that the occasion warranted there being no other subject of conversation but himself.

Jérôme Barrère, his starched shirt-front bulging beneath his beard and his lips glistening with sauce Béarnaise, cried: "And do you know

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what he'll do tonight after a day like this? He'll read the Greek Testament!"

"If that had been known earlier," said the wife of the historian, improving the occasion—she was a horse-faced woman who revealed large anaemic-looking gums when she spoke—"I am sure, Émile, that you would have been elected at the first vote."

And Lartois was aware of a fissure in his happiness. "Yes," he thought, "a little later on I shall take down the Testament because reading Greek prevents my thinking."

The waiter's black arm appeared before his eyes, pouring out the burgundy. Lartois heard Simon's voice, the ethereal whisperings of Marie-Hélène Éterlin, and the passionate outbursts of Princess Tozzi, who was half-mad and, at fifty-four, her face sagging, still talked to men with embarrassing avidity. Soon all these people would disperse and leave him alone.

And he began dreading the moment when he would find himself back once more between the party walls of the Avenue d'Iéna, alone, the doors closed on him, amid that huge sleeping hive of families and couples. On ordinary days it did not matter; indeed, he was often quite pleased to be alone with his reflection in the looking-glass. But tonight, suddenly, the prospect was intolerable. The bell-glass of loneliness, which had descended on him during the afternoon amid the heavy silence of the audience-hall, now imprisoned him once more amid his guests; and the day he had lived through had so stretched his nerves that the food and wine could produce in him no sensation of euphoria. "From now on I shall always be placed on the right of my hostess, my articles will be paid at double rates, and I shall have my name in *Larousse*. And yet, in the end, I shall be forgotten just the same. And, in spite of it all, I shall be alone tonight. Let's try to be brilliant."

He adopted the formula of the elderly, set off on a series of rapid anecdotes, juggling with his memories, mingling the lewd and the tragic, making his phrases sparkle. The others said to themselves: "Really, when he's in form, Lartois is quite wonderful!"

"Oh, Émile, do tell us the story of the train!" cried Princess Tozzi.

"What story about a train?" asked Lartois, knowing perfectly well which story she meant.

"You know, the one about the two Lesbians in the train."

"Ah, yes, of course . . ."

But, do what he would, dinner came to an end. The coffee left little black dregs in the bottoms of the cups, and no one wanted any more champagne. Barrère was beginning to doze. Marcellin, the publisher, left first and the Barrères took advantage of a lift in his car. Then another couple left. It was midnight when, leaving the Ritz, Lartois found himself on the pavement in company with Princess Tozzi, Madame Éterlin, Simon and Michel Neudecker, a tall drug-addict of about forty,

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thin, stooping, silent and already bald, who was kept by Princess Tozzi.

The moon, a bright June moon, lit up the façades of the Place Vendôme and turned the bronze column green.

"Don't let's part yet," said Lartois. "Why don't we go and have a last drink in Montmartre?"

"What you, a member of the Académie Française, in a night-club?" cried Madame Éterlin.

"And why not?" replied Lartois laughing. "That's life! Contrast, my dear! To hell with convention! For the last two years I've been watching my step because of the damned election! Now I've got a right to start doing what I please again."

"Bravo!" cried Princess Tozzi. "Let's go to the Carnaval! It's the best night-club in Paris!"

Then, taking her aside, Michel Neudecker, who had already been showing signs of impatience, spoke for the first time in two hours. In the low, angry, agonized voice of the intoxicated, he made a scene. He wanted to go home.

"We shall only stay a quarter of an hour. You can surely wait another quarter of an hour, can't you?" whispered Princess Tozzi.

"I know those quarters of an hour, they're death to me," said Neudecker staring straight before him. "You enjoy making me suffer."

Nevertheless he got into the car.

X

Simon had no experience of night-clubs. He had only been to a night-club about twice before, and had not cared for it much. But he had done himself pretty well at Lartois's dinner. The long room of the Carnaval, filled with a thick blue cloud of smoke, pleased him; he watched the couples dancing, talked and laughed with Princess Tozzi as if she were an old friend; the little icy bubbles of the champagne melted away in his throat, glass after glass, and the music helped to make him feel happy. "That's how it is," he thought, "night-clubs make for friendliness, break down conventional barriers. There's a certain freedom of atmosphere. . . ."

He now felt only very slightly annoyed with Marie-Hélène Éterlin for the retrospective sentimentality she had displayed during the afternoon, and for the way she had transformed Lartois's inauguration into personal commemoration of her liaison with Jean de La Monnerie.

He was not aware of the precise instant that his sense of reality suddenly changed, the instant that the universe seemed to alter in density. It was the moment when Lucien Maublanc, already drunk, came and sat at their table between the illustrious physician and Princess Tozzi. Maublanc rarely had the luck to meet friends of his own generation in a night-club.

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"Why haven't you come in your cocked hat?" he cried, thumping Lartois on the shoulder.

And he straightway announced the great news he was in process of celebrating.

"He's ruined, you know, your friend Schoudler; washed up, flattened out, finished! In a week's time you'll see a notice on the door of the Avenue de Messine saying: 'For Sale.' And everyone'll say: 'It's Maublanc's revenge.' Oh, I shall be ruthless! They haven't a penny left. They're trying to scrape together a few millions to keep their sugar-refineries afloat. And they came and asked me for them, asked me, the fools! They're washed up! Finished!"

"Very odd, very odd indeed," thought Simon. "Supposing I telephone the news to Rousseau straight away. Where have I seen this man before? Oh yes, at La Monnerie's funeral." And he automatically held his empty glass out to the waiter.

"Monsieur," Lulu went on, suddenly addressing himself to Michel Neudecker, "if you have any shares in Sonchelles, or the Schoudler Bank, or any other holdings in those bandits' concerns, sell out, sell out tomorrow. I'm giving you sound advice. There's going to be a first-class smash."

Michel Neudecker, his face grey and tense, his eyes sunken, gazed at Lulu with distaste and made no reply. "I'd like to blow peas at his head," he thought drunkenly, remembering a pea-shooter he had owned in childhood.

Lulu tasted the champagne and made a sign to the waiter.

"Take away this concoction!" he said. "It's filth. Bring Mumm Cordon Rouge at once. I'm host, Lartois, to you and your friends! I feel in royal mood tonight. Well, and how are you? And where's your cocked hat?"

"Oh, you're the kind of chap I like!" Simon suddenly shouted to him across the table in a voice so altered that it made Madame Éterlin start.

And he held out his hand across the table to grasp Lulu Maublanc's long, bent fingers.

"And I like you very much too, young man," replied the latter. "In the first place, you've got a large head, which distinguishes you from other people, and I like that. Have a cigar. I can see we're going to be friends!"

"That's it, that's it!" cried Simon. "We've both got large heads and large hearts too!"

His eyes shone bright behind his tortoiseshell spectacles, his hair was in disorder and his neck felt clammy.

"Simon, you're drunk," Madame Éterlin said in a low voice.

"Not at all, not at all, I'm never drunk, I never have been drunk. I'm happy, that's all. Of course it's very surprising to see anyone happy!"

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Humanity refuses to be happy! Drunk? I know what drunks are like, you don't have to tell me, I know. All my childhood . . . All my childhood . . ."

He was thinking, as he hardly did once in a month, of his father. There was nothing in common between the rages of that village alcoholic, shouting for hours round a drink-stained table, reeling through the streets, and the sensation of luxurious pleasure and mental liberation that he felt at this moment. "I'm a civilized man with a perception of the verities."

He put out his hand towards the champagne in the ice-bucket to help himself. "I assure you, Simon, you'd be wiser to go home."

"Oh, leave him alone," Princess Tozzi intervened in her cracked, avid voice. "It's so delightful to be drunk! That's what one drinks for! People who stop when they feel it affecting them are miserable, contemptible little creatures. All pleasures should be plumbed to their depths."

She smiled at Simon with a large, and she believed enticing mouth. Her make-up was melting, cracking along her wrinkles. At seven o'clock in the evening, as she came from her bath, after expert plastering, she could still create an illusion and remind people that for twenty years she had been a beautiful woman. But now all the crevices of age, the lines of sensuality, were apparent in her face.

But Simon no longer saw things clearly. He felt a miraculous brotherhood with all these people, with the sole exception of Madame Éterlin.

"I like you too," he said, turning to Princess Tozzi. "You understand things, don't you?"

In token of thanks she kneaded his knee. He heard Lulu Maublanc saying to Lartois: "She's going to be a great actress, you know. And it was I who discovered her. Oh, she's an extremely nice girl. Everything as it should be, very good family. She's here with me tonight; I'll introduce you."

Sylvaine Dual, who had gone to powder her nose, was behind the velvet curtains that masked the entrance, listening to Anny Féret describing those present.

" . . . and the one with the glasses, the youngest, the one who's gesticulating so much, is a big noise I'm told in the Ministry of Education. People like that ought to be ashamed to come to a place like this. And then to go and educate children! What's more, look at the women they've brought along, really, what a sight, I ask you!"

The little redhead was automatically twisting the gold bracelet she was wearing. She was no longer little Dual, living above a sordid courtyard in the Faubourg Montmartre, but Sylvaine Dual. Lulu, as he had promised at their first meeting, had given her her chance. Sylvaine's name was on the posters of a new play in the Boulevards, where

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she had got a part thanks to the money Lulu had put up. But the most astonishing part of it was that she showed quite a talent for comedy.

"This newcomer with her astringent charm and authentic youth," said the dramatic critic of the *Figaro*, "alone saved the evening from complete boredom." And this had been enough to give her a tiny reputation in the restricted world of the theatre and even already to arouse certain jealousies. Her photograph in evening dress was appearing in the fashionable magazines.

"Well, you've certainly managed things pretty well with Lulu. My God, the money you take off him!" Anny went on. "A flat in the Rue de Naples, a maîd, a theatre in which you can do as you like! While I'm still here in this filthy night-club. You've been cleverer than I have, that's a fact. But at least you can say that old Anny was a good friend to you when you were starving. Without me where would you be?"

"Yes, of course; and I haven't forgotten it," Sylvaine replied without enthusiasm. "But you know, if it hadn't been him, it would have been someone else. Besides, if one has talent, it's bound to come out some time."

"Bitch!" murmured Anny Féret as she watched her move away.

When Sylvaine reached the table, they rose to make room for her. Almost at once, while the band played softly, the fat Hungarian came forward, carrying his paunch before him, his violin in his hand.

"Oh, what pretty ladies, what pretty ladies!" he cried. "A positive posy of flowers. What would the ladies like to hear? . . . Very well, a very special Hungarian waltz!"

The lights dimmed, the spotlight seized the table in its brilliant cone, the bow began to fly across the strings.

"Splendid, splendid," Simon murmured.

In this place, existing for the nocturnal amusement of the younger generation of Paris, only this table, made up mostly of the elderly and declining, emerged from the shadows. The harsh light revealed their bodies' weariness, exposed them to the whole room on a huge, round, blazing salver. There they sat, motionless, congealed in their own effigies, like waxworks in the Musée Grévin. There seemed to be no soul behind their eyes that were merely mirrors of oxidized silver. Their faces showed not only the fatigue of an evening that the physical tissues could no longer bear, but the signs of internal decay.

Marie-Hélène Éterlin's cheeks were sunken, as if melting away under the heat of the glare; Neudecker, in spite of the heat, was shaken by a succession of shivering-fits. "And to think that that fellow was once a hero!" thought Lartois. Against his will, he had remained sober and could still judge with a pitiless lucidity. "It's over, it's over . . . and none of this amuses me any more."

Even Simon, who was not yet thirty-five, had ceased to be a young man, and now that he was drunk already bore the stigmata of age.

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Sylvaine alone among them was young, just twenty. To make it quite clear to everyone that she was an actress, she had kept on her stage make-up. But it could not conceal her youth any more than Irène Tozzi's maquillage could hide her wrinkles. Sylvaine's low-cut dress revealed the curve of her still small breasts. Her hair flamed in the cone of light. However rotten she might be within, there were no outward signs of it. Little fixed metallic points of light began to glow in Lartois's eyes.

At that moment Simon said to Sylvaine in a voice whose strength he could no longer control: "You're beautiful, very beautiful, too beautiful for the rest of us! It's you who have the answer, the only answer."

With the unexpected dignity of a great artist the Hungarian suddenly stopped playing and said: "Let the gentleman talk his fill, I'll go on afterwards."

"You play very well, very well, but that's music too, and more beautiful than all your Liszt and Chopin," Simon cried, indicating Sylvaine's face.

"Simon!" said Madame Éterlin.

"What? Has a man no longer the right to say what he thinks? Is all frankness to be banished from the earth!" said Simon, half-rising. "She must be told how beautiful she is, she must be made to realize it! But you're jealous, and I very well know why, yes I do! But, you see, you've got memories for consolation!"

He was shouting in the silence, and was not displeased to feel the attention of the whole room concentrated on him.

"Simon, for goodness' sake be quiet!" said Madame Éterlin.

"All right, I'll be quiet. But I have problems you cannot resolve. Only women of whom one does not yet know can understand things," he went on, still staring at the little actress.

A tip assuaged the violinist's pride, and he finished the Hungarian waltz.

When the lights had returned to normal and new bottles had been brought, the Musée Grévin table came to life again amid considerable confusion.

Neudecker insisted on going home. Sylvaine asked Simon: "Have you seen my play? Come and applaud me whenever you like. I'll put my box at your disposal."

Feeling herself the centre of many desires, she laughed loudly, shook her hair, and puffed out long jets of cigarette-smoke. Madame Éterlin's eyes were moist.

Lulu Maublanc suddenly asked in a thick voice: "Lartois! Even though you are a member of the Academy, you still know a thing or two, I expect. Can one still have a child at fifty-eight?"

"There's no reason why not. You can even have one at a much greater age," Lartois replied, still gazing at Sylvaine.

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But she was humming the popular tune the orchestra was playing, bending her head towards Simon.

"Sylvaine, do you hear that?" said Lulu. "Lartois has just said I'm quite capable of having a child. He says I'm in my prime. Little girl, I want to have a child with you!"

Sylvaine looked enquiringly at the doctor, then gave a high-pitched laugh.

"Why, what's funny about that?" Lulu asked. "I'm giving you a great proof of my love."

"Don't talk nonsense, Lulu," she said.

"What do you mean, nonsense? Are you trying to say that . . ."

His voice became resentful and angry; she felt that things were going wrong.

"But, of course, darling Lulu, of course you're capable of having one," she said. "But I don't want one. What would I do with a child? Think of my career. Besides, a child is very expensive!"

She had put her arm round his neck and was insinuating herself back into his good graces.

"Well, I want one to infuriate Schoudler. He makes me sick with his crowd of brats. That's why!" he said. "Listen, little girl, if you have a child by me, I'll give you a million!"

Sylvaine started and looked at him strangely.

"No, no, I'm not drunk," Lulu insisted. "I mean it. A million, fifty thousand louis, at once, in cash, on the day of the birth."

And taking the whole table to witness, he cried: "Do you hear, all of you! I'll give this girl a million if she has a child by me."

There were cries, exclamations, laughter.

"Bravo!"

"Splendid, when's it to be?"

"Who's to be godfather?"

Proud of himself, Lulu stuck out his chest and laughed between his long yellow teeth.

"Put it down in black and white," said Sylvaine in the middle of the hubbub.

"That's it, a document, a contract for the archives!" cried Simon. "There's a man after my own heart!"

He took a piece of paper from his pocket and watched Lulu Maublanc write out his promise in due form.

The atmosphere before Simon's eyes seemed to quiver like rising steam. The faces about him appeared to be floating and suddenly, changing their position. But in fact none mattered to him any more except Sylvaine's. Simon was at the stage of drunkenness that engenders not only a fixed desire but the devilish cunning to assuage it. He wanted the girl that very night and was determined to hang on to the couple for as long as might be necessary. Only two things could thwart him,

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a sufficient dose of alcohol to knock him out, or a door slammed in his face.

When Sylvaine had folded the paper and put it in her bag, she laughed stridently, put a piece of ice down Simon's neck, and pulled his hair.

Simon was not alone in constructing devilish schemes around Sylvaine. Irène Tozzi, watching her lover shiver, tried to discover for her own obscure ends whether he was attracted by the little redhead.

She suddenly leaned towards him.

"No," he replied, "I want to go home, that's all."

"Well, don't be impatient; in any case I shall be with you tonight," she murmured.

"It's not that I want, and you know it well enough."

"Brute, I'll make you pay for that."

"No you won't. I'll leave you, do you hear, I've had enough of you! I won't stand this slavery any longer!"

At a neighbouring table Anny Féret, watching Sylvaine, was thinking: "If she were alone I'd take the little bitch home with me. Oh, she'll end by coming back to me one day all right."

And Lartois, using his accustomed technique, was wondering how he could organize the return journey so as, if possible, to take Sylvaine home last. "No, it won't work. The couples are all made up. It's a bad night, and that's all there is to it . . ."

He was well aware that in three days' time he would find the party mentioned in the gossip-column of *Le Cri de Paris*, and he thought: "It's crazy, absolutely crazy to have come here. I feel even more lonely now than I did before." The people round him had more or less taken leave of their ordinary senses. They were stammering, laughing, shouting, arguing, and seemed to have some form of mutual understanding that defied all logic. And he was excluded from their fellow-feeling.

Sylvaine and Simon clinked their glasses so hard that Simon's broke in his hand. Simon bled a little but didn't even seem to notice it. Not to be outdone, Sylvaine broke hers on the table. A waiter, stooping, napkin in hand, came to pick up the pieces and mop up the spilt champagne.

"Monsieur Neudecker and I want to go home," said Marie-Hélène Éterlin in a tearful voice.

"Why go home? Life's just beginning!" cried Simon. "All right then, go on home, go on! It's not a bad idea. But I'm thirsty, thirsty!"

"Yes, I think it's time we went," said Lartois getting to his feet.

He summoned the waiter but Lulu intervened.

"No, no, this is my party," he said, "but I shall never forgive you for not having come in a cocked hat."

As he went towards the door, Simon stumbled against the tables, which seemed to him the more astonishing since huge empty spaces

appeared to be opening before his feet in the semi-darkness. Lulu and he had just decided to speak to each other in the second person singular.

"I shall never leave you any more," said Simon taking him by the arm; "I've at last found a man and I shan't ever leave you any more!"

"But I tell you I'm going to give her a child," Lulu answered putting his arm round Sylvaine's waist.

"That's all right. Doesn't matter a bit. I shall be a witness."

There was a rank of taxis along the pavement.

Without saying good night to anyone, Neudecker dived into the first one, dragging Irène Tozzi after him, and as the taxi set off, they could be heard abusing each other.

Still clinging to Lulu and Sylvaine, Simon declared in a hoarse voice that he had nowhere in the world to go, nor any other friends, and insisted on getting into the taxi with them.

"Simon, please! If you could see yourself, you'd be horrified!" said Madame Éterlin.

"We'll see him home, don't worry," said the little actress, who had now also taken Simon by the arm.

Lartois, seeing how things were turning out and seizing his opportunity, said to Madame Éterlin: "Come on, Marie-Hélène, I'll take you home."

"But we can't leave him like this?"

"Yes, yes, he's all right. Nothing'll happen to him. When a man's drunk, it's best not to argue with him, believe me."

And he persuaded her into a third taxi.

Simon had no idea how long the journey lasted. Sylvaine's head was resting on Lulu's chest, but in the darkness she had slipped her hand inside Simon's open shirt-front and was playing with the hairs on his chest.

Quite unaware of his surroundings, he found himself in an unknown flat, realized that he was being given a hard-boiled egg to eat which pleased him very much indeed. He had collapsed into a chair and there was a golden rain before his eyes and a vast merry-go-round of white walls.

Two naked bodies were jerking about on a bed a long way off; vague sounds reached him. He would have liked another hard-boiled egg and some more to drink.

A voice said: "Well, after that, Lulu darling, I'm bound to be pregnant."

Then Simon, who was dozing, felt himself being pulled up by the arms while he heard a voice whispering: "Come on, he's asleep. He's even drunker than you are."

He recognized Sylvaine, without her brassière, leading him into the next room, laying him out on a couch, and helping him to undress.

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She was murmuring incomprehensible words.

"If he has doubts, I'll tell him you were there and saw it all. You'll tell him the same, won't you? He must believe it."

He groaned acquiescence.

Suddenly he bit her shoulder, her breast, and it seemed to him that the whole universe and himself were engulfed in flames.

Sharp nails clawed at his back and a voice beneath him cried: "Wait!"

And then sleep covered all.

XI

Lartois's taxi was going down towards the Étoile.

"Simon hurt me very much this evening," said Madame Éterlin.

"He was unbelievably vulgar. And then managed to compromise me so disgracefully! It's too stupid, but I feel I want to cry. You're sure nothing will happen to him?"

"Of course not, of course not, my dear friend," replied Lartois. "Calm yourself. It was all quite unimportant. Simon's charming."

"I don't think so any more. The way he threw himself at that girl's head! . . . I'm too old, am I not?" she asked.

"Certainly not, Marie-Hélène. How could you think such a thing! There's a youthful freshness about you that I've been admiring all evening, I promise you."

"You're kind, Émile, very kind; but I know that I ought to break things off with Simon. I've fallen in love with the boy and life's going to be hell for me."

A car came out of a side-street; the taxi-driver braked frantically. Madame Éterlin screamed and found herself thrown against Lartois. Putting his arm round her shoulders, he gently put her back into her seat.

"Of course," he said, "he has both the good and the bad qualities of youth. It may be that you need someone steadier and more reliable. And it seems to me that just at present you're being too much of a recluse. You ought to get about more, see people, renew your contacts with the world."

As he talked he put his lips to her cheek.

"No, Émile, no, please don't," she said, pushing him away. "I don't feel very well, I've got a headache."

"Would you like to come to my place for a moment, I'll give you a cachet."

"No, thanks, I'd rather go home, really."

They fell silent for a moment. The taxi was bowling along one of the avenues in the Bois. Lartois returned to the attack in more direct fashion.

"No, my dear, please don't. You really have no need to sustain your

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reputation," said Madame Éterlin, crossing her legs. "I'm extremel flattered that I should have aroused your interest, even for one evening but leave it at that."

"But it isn't for one evening, Marie-Hélène; you've been in m thoughts for a very long time. I've loved you for ages."

"No, no, don't say things you know aren't true," she replied, patting his hand. "We're old friends; you wouldn't have waited until today It's mere politeness."

There was another silence and the driver heard: "No, Émile . . ."

And a few seconds later, in a more determined voice: "Really, Émile stop! Or I shall get out of the taxi. Don't!"

She opened the window and a gust of fresh air blew in to the taxi. Then Madame Éterlin withdrew defensively into the corner of the seat.

"You really are odious," she said. "I've told you I don't like it and that I've got a headache. And who do you think I am? The sort of woman who would yield like this in a matter of three minutes merely to pass the time in a taxi? You really attach too great a value to your attentions, or too little. Now, calm down!"

He changed his tactics and, as they crossed the Pont de Boulogne, he told her of the depth of his unspoken feelings for her, of his need for enduring affection, of his search for a unique love, all of which was partly true, but vitiated by the fact that he was saying these things to her.

The taxi stopped in the Rue Tissandre.

Lartois got out and accompanied Madame Éterlin as far as the garden door.

"I should like to talk to you a little longer," he said.

"No, really, I tell you . . ."

"So, you aren't even touched by the fact that this is the day of my inauguration as an Academician? You're going to leave me all alone?"

He said this in such a tone of voice that she was indeed touched. But her headache was too bad.

"Come another night and we'll talk. But really I'm so weary now that I might even believe you. Thank you again for the wonderful dinner."

And she closed the door.

"I'm a fool," he said to himself during the return journey, "a fool. I shall have to send her flowers tomorrow, and she'll believe that I'm in love with her. What on earth came over me to talk to her like that! And now . . ."

Standing on the pavement of the Avenue d'Iéna outside his house, when he had paid off the taxi, he still couldn't make up his mind to go in. He looked at his watch; it was four o'clock in the morning. There was already a pale light in the sky, dimming the stars. The air was cool and reviving; the few sounds there were had a crystalline

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quality. The unreality of dawn lay over the city. Buoyed up with alcohol, Lartois felt no desire for sleep, and the thought of perambulating his flat for an hour, or perhaps even two, wondering what life could hold for him henceforth, was intolerable.

"I've got everything, everything I ever hoped for, I've succeeded in everything I wished to do; thousands of writers and doctors have been envying me today, and I'm unhappy. The truth is I still have too much youthful vigour for my age. That's the trouble. What can I do now? To think that in this city there are hundreds of young, pretty, lonely women who would be so happy to have a companion tonight, and I don't know them! Besides, they're fast asleep, everyone's asleep."

Occupied with thoughts such as these, he had begun walking down the Champs-Élysées, looking out for a solitary woman. The Avenue was deserted. He passed a young couple who were walking quickly along, pressed close against each other. A drunkard reeled along the wall. A rag-picker was searching a dustbin. A woman, obviously a prostitute, was walking down the Avenue in front of Lartois. He quickened his pace, his heart beating a little, so as to catch her up. What did it matter, after all, if she was a whore! Had she not a palpable body like another? Besides, he could ask her questions. But the woman turned into the Rue du Colisée and disappeared under an archway. It was the hour when even prostitutes go home. He went on walking, hoping for some other encounter. He reached the Place de la Concorde without having seen anyone but a couple locked in each other's arms on a bench.

Before him stretched the great square with its hundreds of lamps, its fountains sparkling with reflections like mercury, the façades of the Crillon Hotel and the Ministry of Marine; and, beyond the bridge, the dark mass of the Palais Bourbon, cast in bronze rather than built of stone, the labour of Jupiter's builders rather than of mere men.

"The most beautiful city in the world," he murmured.

An empty taxi came by, rattling noisily in the silence. He hailed it.

"To the Children's Hospital," he said.

The sleepy house-physician on duty, who thought that he was being summoned to deal with another accident—emergencies had come one after another all night—was startled out of his wits to see the senior consultant in a dinner-jacket at nearly five in the morning.

"How is little Corvol?" Lartois asked.

"In a coma since nine o'clock, sir," replied the house-physician.

"I feared so. I wanted to have a look at him this evening but could not get here. The inauguration lasted longer than I thought, and then dinner, and then friends who insisted on carrying me off."

He took off his dinner-jacket, washed his hands, and put on a white coat. His face looked tired, but his eyes were as alert and his speech as precise as usual.

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"Let's go up," he said. "I told you three days ago that we shouldn't be able to save him."

Lartois and the house-physician made their way through long dimly-lit corridors which smelt strongly of ether and formalin.

The night-nurse on duty on the floor joined them.

Lartois pushed open a glass door and went into a little white room.

On the bed lay a child of about nine, his skin bluish, his hair matted with fever, his head thrown back and his breathing feeble. There was a small mole in the centre of his forehead.

Lartois took the child's pulse and lifted an eyelid beneath which the pupil was turned upwards. He pulled back the sheet. The little limbs, emaciated by dehydration, felt abnormally hard to the touch. The skin had a slightly metallic appearance.

"When was he given his last injection?" Lartois asked.

"At six o'clock, sir," said the nurse.

"Good, we'll give him another now. And get everything ready for an intra-cardiac. We may need it at any moment."

"Do you think, sir . . ." said the house-physician.

"No, I don't," said Lartois. "In fact I'm quite sure it'll do no good at all. But one must always try, my boy, and go on trying, even after death has taken place."

The nurse fitted the flask of glucosed serum to a metal stand and searched for a place on the little bluish thigh that had not been marked by the punctures of previous injections. Then she regulated the flow of the serum through the rubber tube, drop by drop.

"If he can still assimilate it . . ." said Lartois.

The dying child remained motionless; there was no reaction; the eyes still showed white.

"I hear that your inauguration went off very well, sir," said the house-physician. "I saw the photographs in the papers."

"Yes, quite well," Lartois replied; "very well, really. The hall was full and the audience enthusiastic. Perhaps it'll happen to you one day, Morant."

"Oh no, not to me, I know very well it couldn't ever happen to me," said the house-physician with a modest smile.

They were silent a moment, watching little Corvol. The serum was no longer sinking in the flask. Lartois gently moved the needle under the skin. A swelling showed that the liquid was stagnant.

"Go and lie down, Morant, and you too, nurse," said Lartois. "There's no point in our all three being here."

"No, sir, I'll stay," said the nurse.

"No, I'll watch developments myself—if you can call them developments. I really need no one to help me with the intra-cardiac. I assure you, I'd rather be alone."

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And Lartois remained sitting by the child, his eyes fixed on the little mole, a spot of amber on the mother-of-pearl brow. He had nothing further to learn about tubercular meningitis; all that remained was to receive confirmation of a diagnosis made fifty times before. But the clinician, covered with honours, who, out of pure egotism, had never known paternity, still suffered at children's deathbeds a pang of pity which he had long since ceased to feel for adults. This was what he looked for in his work, a last glimmer of human solidarity within himself, a last untarnished spot on the mirror that could reflect something other than himself. "Poor child," he thought, "he won't see the sun rise again."

The child suddenly turned restive, struggled, groaned, and became convulsed with the grotesque gestures of the hanged. The pupils were entirely turned up towards the forehead, the bony knees knocked against each other, the skin turned purple and a little froth formed at the corners of the lips. The rubber tube with its metal point had fallen back across the turned-down sheets. Lartois turned off the tap under the flask, came back to the child and held the little body up by the shoulders. The child no longer saw or heard; perhaps was not even conscious of his own suffering. This was only a last contortion of nerves and muscles under the heel of the ogre who was throttling the life out of him.

"Quiet, child, quiet," Lartois murmured automatically, knowing well that speech was useless.

The crisis passed. Lartois gently stroked the child's forehead, passing his finger backwards and forwards over the little amber mole. The body had now regained its immobility. The pulse was increasing in speed to the point of being uncountable, while diminishing in strength; more like an electric vibration in a wire than the throbbing of an artery. Lartois, with his stethoscope to his ears, was now listening directly to the heart, and what he heard was terrifying: a whole future in process of dissolving in a muscle the size of one's fist. At the exact instant when the stethoscope fell silent, and a slight collapse of the body became perceptible to him, Lartois bared the little chest still further, seized the unusually long needle of fine steel that lay ready for him on a tray, and with a speed and precision surprising in a man of sixty-one who had had no sleep for many hours, buried it with a single jab between two ribs deep into the child's heart. Then, pressing on the glass plunger with his thumb, he expelled the adrenalin from the syringe, removed the long needle with one straight movement, inspected the point, took up his stethoscope again and waited. After a moment he raised sad eyes to the window where the light of day was filtering through the slits in the shutters, and drew the sheet up over the little corpse.

When Lartois left the hospital it was broad daylight. Dustbins were

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being collected; men on their way to work looked at Lartois mockingly, taking him for an old rake going home with the milk. They were only half-wrong.

There were many people who, on opening their newspapers that morning, wondered what this Monsieur Émile Lartois's qualifications were that he should be elected to the Academy. Had they but known it, the justification for this signal honour lay not so much in his work, as in the uncommon personality of a man who was at once capable of reading the Greek Testament, seducing women in taxis, spending hours in a night-club and going, in the dawn, to help a dying child.

XII

Things happened exactly as Noël Schoudler had foreseen. Two days after his conversation with Lucien Maublanc, a large quantity of Sonchelles shares were thrown on the market. Since Sonchelles were considered very sound, they at first maintained their value. But the increasing number being unloaded began to lower the price. Between midday and two o'clock Sonchelles had fallen sixty points. Albéric Canet, the Schoudlers' stockbroker, telephoned the banker several times but could only get this reply from him: "Let things take their course! Come to my office as soon as the Bourse closes."

François, who had also been told, tried in vain to see his father. Noël refused to see anyone till late in the afternoon, having remained closeted for a long time with Canet and an outside broker.

"Well, what have you got to say about it all?" he asked François.

"Father, I don't understand. What's happening?"

"I'll tell you," said the giant. "It so happens that the situation you've placed us in at Sonchelles has become known and cautious people are getting rid of their shares, beginning with the Leroy Bank, which jettisoned a huge block of shares during the course of the day. And it's not finished yet. Wait until you see what follows."

He had a reproachful look in his eye and François felt in no position to stand up to him.

Next morning transactions in Sonchelles were conducted in a curious atmosphere. Speculators, suspecting a deliberate operation, bought; but the quantity of shares offered far surpassed the number of purchasers. Many hard-headed people, aware of the rumours that were going round, gave orders to sell. The Leroy's broker led a merciless offensive. That day Sonchelles, having dropped a hundred points, closed at 1840. In sympathy, the other Schoudler undertakings quoted, the Bank and the Zoa mines, also fell. The Bourse in general closed on a falling market.

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In the afternoon Noël Schoudler received a telephone call from Anatole Rousseau who told him of anxiety in political circles.

"You can reassure your friends, my dear Minister," replied Noël. "And don't believe anything you may hear. My son François has made a blunder over a capital increase. People have exaggerated it. It'll cost them a pretty penny. It doesn't affect our position in the least. And Papa Schoudler is there in the background, so don't worry. Do you want proof? I'll tell my broker to buy you two hundred Sonchelles tomorrow before the Bourse closes. If they fall I'll have them placed to my account. If they rise I'll hold them for you."

He had said this in a hearty way, as he might have said at the races: "I'm putting fifty louis on Ginger Boy for you."

"Oh, by the way, my dear Minister," he went on, "I've been an officer of the Legion of Honour for a long while now. Don't you think it's time we began to think about my being made a Commander? Particularly at this moment; with what's happening; anyway, you understand what I mean. . . . Are you sure? Oh, yes, of course, father and son in the same honours list. Quite out of the question. Well, postpone François's cross. He's young; he's got plenty of time."

"Is he bluffing?" Rousseau wondered as he hung up.

Fearing the worst, he thought over the various matters with which he might be reproached and sought means of defending himself.

He could make nothing of Noël Schoudler's manner: was it the true calm of a man sure of himself, or the false calm of dissimulated concern?

As Albéric Canet said, and he moreover was the only person in whom the giant confided during these days: "One could never tell what the hell the fellow was up to."

And in fact Noël himself began to be incapable of distinguishing clearly between the true and the false, between his basic intentions and the current situation, as he would have been able to do at forty.

Clearly the operation was proceeding as he had wished. Tomorrow—and the orders were already given—he proposed to maintain the Schoudler Bank and the Zoa mines at the current market price, while allowing Sonchelles to fall further. And then towards the end of the day, or the next day, he would buy the shares back in a block at rock-bottom with the large resources he was no longer thought to possess. This was what the whole operation was about, everything depended on these reserves. As others, when they have nothing left, go out of their way to create a façade of confidence, he, so solidly based, had succeeded in spreading mistrust. And to succeed, his one requirement had been a blind enemy such as Maublanc. Before a week was out Schoudler would have established the shares at their original price once more. He would then have a controlling interest not of twelve but of sixteen or seventeen per cent in Sonchelles; he could then take what steps he liked to increase the capital, while, so far as he was concerned,

the Maublanc-Leroy group would to all intents and purposes have paid for it.

At the same time, François's irresponsibility would have become abundantly clear, and he would be compelled to offer his resignation at the next board meeting. All the kudos for having saved the refineries would be Noël's and he would take control of them once again.

"But how wise I was to keep my reserves in hand for difficult times; it would have been a pretty kettle of fish if I had allowed François to have his way!" he thought, forgetting that he was the one and only author of the situation. "The boy will have aged me ten years by this business!" And he put his hand to his heart.

Indeed, Noël had foreseen everything, except the interview his son decided to have with Lucien Maublanc.

François had been working very hard for several months. Till now he had felt no fatigue. It came on him suddenly. In a matter of a few days he had passed from enthusiasm to a state of profound depression. His father had had little difficulty in convincing him of the responsibilities he bore in the matter. Moreover, the two men were hardly on speaking terms, and Noël, seeing François looking worried, said to himself: "I'll let him stew in his own juice; it'll do him good." François kept silence, his face set hard, and his thoughts apparently turned inwards. He knew what was going on; he realized that Maublanc was the author of the crisis, and he had heard the rumours of catastrophe that were going the rounds.

François believed in the virtue of frankness and straight talking.

"It's up to me to try to do something," he thought. "Moreover, Father doesn't seem to realize the perilous nature of the situation. He's getting old; he's no longer got the resilience he would once have had..."

Lucien Maublanc arranged a meeting at his club in the Boulevard Haussmann, so that some fifty important people might see Schoudler's son come begging to him.

Towards François his manner was indecently triumphant and cynical. He was so sure of himself that he had no fear of unmasking his batteries. He had mounted his own well-considered, carefully planned game; and it was going forward to crush and destroy.

With his cigarette hanging from his teeth and his large clouded eyes staring at an English print, he said: "Finished, washed up! You're ruined; it's mathematically certain. You can no longer maintain Sonchelles; and Sonchelles maintains all the rest. You'll sell the mines? Good. You wait and see what Zoa shares are quoted at tomorrow! I'll make them fall below par if necessary, below par. And you'll let go; you'll have to; you'll let everything go to save the Bank, and you won't save it, and I'll tell you why... Will you have a glass of port?"

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"No, thank you," said François.

He heard the sound of defeat beating in his ears. He had come for plain speaking; he had not expected to find it so plain.

"It's the withdrawal of deposits that'll kill you," said Maublanc. "They'll paralyse you. You'll not only be ruined, you'll be disgraced. You'll have to stop payments at the Bank. Once a crash starts, you know, it goes quickly.

François had not yet visualized this particular eventuality which, now it was mentioned, seemed fatal.

"But, really, what are you after?" he cried. "You'll lose too! What do you want? Sonchelles?"

In his father's name he engaged himself to yield the entire control of the refineries so as to save the rest, provided Maublanc would consent to arrest the disaster.

"I don't care a damn about Sonchelles," Maublanc replied. "Thirty-five years ago your father stole my wife; you ought to have been my son, do you understand? What's more, he's said terrible things about me which have clung to me all my life; he's done me down whenever he could. Your father's cost me millions! Do you think I can forget any of that?"

"But it's not merely a question of my father. I've never done you any harm! Besides, you shouldn't altogether forget that my wife's your half-niece. . . ."

"Had she behaved as a half-niece of mine should, she would never have married a Schoudler. What's more, I put the La Monneries in the same category."

François was white with impotent rage. Again he spoke of Jean-Noël and Marie-Ange, but hopelessly, for his own benefit merely, because his children's names had always seemed to be lucky omens. Lulu Maublanc chuckled with satisfaction.

"You can tell your father that I'm expecting a child too," he said. "I can no longer indulge in philanthropy."

And in response to François's astonished expression, he said: "That surprises you, doesn't it? You also believe the stories your family circulate about me! I promise you I shall not relent towards the Schoudlers till I see the lot of them dead."

François left the club his head aching, a chill at the heart. He had done all he could do, tried everything, persuasion, intimidation, supplication. He had not even been able to obtain a few days' respite. Tomorrow, by the stubborn vindictive will of this elderly clubman, who held their destiny in his podgy hands, Sonchelles, Zoa and the Bank, the whole Schoudler fortune, would collapse on the market.

Maublanc had uttered the word "crash" and said: "I'm waiting for the moment when I can take everything you own in liquidation of your debts!"

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"And it's all my fault," thought François. "I'm responsible for it all!"

He had no thought of returning to the Avenue de Messine, but walked at random through the streets, as if he were enclosed in a cage of glass in which he fought a lonely battle with his misery.

XIII

At the same time in the big garden of the Schoudler house, a dozen children invited for Jean-Noël and Marie-Ange were wondering what game to play. They had finished tea; there was still a little chocolate mousse at the corners of their mouths and crumbs of Savoy biscuits powdered their pink dresses and sailor suits. Their stomachs full of sweet things, they felt rather sleepy.

The nurses were knitting in the shade.

Little Raoul Sandoval, thin, his ears sticking out, sniffed from habit and screwed up his nose as he followed Marie-Ange about like an unhappy lover.

"Suppose we played at talking," he said, looking at her with an air of supplication.

Jean-Noël bounded forward; he had a suggestion: they would play at "doing good." He explained what it was. His cousin Cendrine, who wore a dental brace because her teeth stuck out, objected with a lisp that there was no fun in playing at beggars.

"Well then, let's play at getting married," the little Sandoval suggested. The month before he had held his sister's bridal train. "Or we could make wreaths out of chestnut-leaves."

He put his arm round Marie-Ange's neck.

"Leave my sister alone," said Jean-Noël, thrusting him roughly aside.

Marie-Ange finally decided that they would play at "funerals." They also took place in church and were much more amusing. Raoul Sandoval was made to lie down on a stone bench; he was covered with a heavy rug and forbidden to move. He was suffocating with heat under the heavy cloth; the chocolate he had eaten was giving him a stomach-ache; he could hear the other children moving about, but he couldn't see them and he couldn't speak to them. This was what it must be like to be really dead. Would Marie-Ange be sorry if he died? Silent tears rolled down his cheeks.

However, Marie-Ange was enjoying herself, acting one part and then another round the rug, the Swiss guard, the priest, the widow and all the rest. She swung an imaginary censer, sprinkled holy water, and handed it to little Cendrine, who passed it on to Jean-Noël.

And suddenly "the corpse" got a great bang on the head through the rug, his head bounced against the stone, and he sat up howling in his shroud.

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It was Jean-Noël. With calculated animosity he had given the catafalque a jolly good punch.

The nurses came running, delivered Raoul Sandoval, put an end to the macabre game, and forbade them to start it again.

"Disgraceful! . . . It's really a shame . . ." Miss Mabel cried.

Anyway it was now time to go home; ribbons were re-tied, collars smoothed. In the small drawing-room the mothers were finishing their bridge, and the children heard a gay voice saying: "Jacqueline, you're dummy (*le mort*) this time." And they felt certain, once again, that they were being teased.

While they went home, dragging their feet, their hands imprisoned in those of their English nurses, the father of Jean-Noël and Marie-Ange was still walking aimlessly along the dusty avenues, past motor-cars blowing noisy horns, through the congestion in the streets.

"I shall find a way out as I walk, I shall find a way out," he said to himself. "Things'll sort themselves tonight or tomorrow morning; the other banks are bound to support us. They're all interdependent. And Father is a Governor of the Bank of France. They won't let a Governor down. And yet they let Boutémy fail, they let . . ."

He had been brought up on the story of the failure of the Universelle. The Patriarch told the story at least once a week. "And we're fifty times less important than the Universelle was. What difference will it make to France? A family gone by the board, that's all."

In the immediate forefront of his mind, on the glass walls of his obsession, he saw reiterated with the persistence of a dream the line from the Stock Exchange reports: "*Opening price . . . closing price . . . Sonchelles refineries*" in small solid type. What would the rate be tomorrow? Would Sonchelles even be quoted? Tomorrow the run on the Bank would begin . . .

Beyond the glass cage was a distant, indifferent world: a milliner's girl carrying a bandbox, a workman rolling a cigarette, a couple of loungers gazing into a florist's window, a delivery boy, standing on the pedals of his tricycle, zizagging uphill . . .

Against the side of the cage appeared the cloudy eyes of Lulu Mau-blanc and his yellow teeth. "I promise you I shall not relent towards the Schoudlers till I see the lot of them dead."

The delivery boy, his backside in the air, was growing smaller with distance as he reached the top of the hill.

"I must see Father, we must have a talk and see what can be done," François thought.

Nevertheless, he knew that he had lost his father's confidence, that the giant would pay no attention to anything he said, would refuse even to listen to him.

"Can't you watch out where you're going?" shouted a taxi-driver.

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François discovered that he was standing stock-still in the middle of the street.

Ah, happy taxi-driver who could afford to hurl insults at others! The whole universe lived careless and indifferent, rejoicing in a general blessing from which he was excluded.

He recalled those titans of finance who were always put forward as examples, men who, from total failure, by hard and persistent labour had risen again within ten years, paid all their debts, and towered over Paris once again, to end their days in an aura of esteem and prestige. "Very well, I shall do likewise," he thought. But how to set about it? With Sonchelles and all the cards in his hands, he had ended like this. Once he was ruined and disgraced, what hope had he? Every door would be closed to him. He would be finished. His father might once have been able to do it; but not he. "I could become a delivery boy—what else is there? And Jacqueline will be a delivery boy's wife. And the children a delivery boy's children . . . There's nothing left but to shoot myself."

At first the idea merely crossed his mind and took no hold on it; it occurred to him as it does to thousands of people who think it or say it every day when something has gone wrong with their love-affairs, their business or their health, and who, under the weight of an obsession, lose for a moment their sense of proper values. When, four streets further on, he thought of it again, it was no longer merely the vague idea of shooting himself, but of "blowing his brains out." The idea of death had become localized.

"I was brave enough in the war!" he thought. But that particular form of courage was no use to him against the Bourse, against Lucien Maublanc, against ruin. It was the mere courage to die. Indeed, when all was said and done, that was all courage was good for.

The bubble Noël had launched without his son's knowledge, and which Maublanc had blown up with wicked glee while François, deceived by both of them, had unconsciously made it even larger, was becoming as big and heavy as a vast purple rock that for several hours yet would be suspended above his head, and beneath which he must pass before it fell.

And there were the letters against the glass again: "*Opening price . . . closing price . . . Sonchelles refineries.*" And Maublanc's cloudy eyes. In François's mind the scales were no longer in balance; the instinct of self-preservation was beginning to grow lighter than the disaster.

He was sweating under his coat, and felt his limbs tremble with fatigue.

Suddenly he met a friend, Paul de Varnacé, a big tall man with a dark carnation in his buttonhole, who, by way of greeting, asked him what he was doing there.

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This happened at the corner of the Avenue d'Iéna, and François was unable to answer him. Varnacé asked him twice if things were "going all right."

"Oh yes, perfectly all right," said François with a fixed stare.

Varnacé left him. François envied him, as he had envied the delivery boy, as he envied everyone outside his cage. He had lost contact with other human beings, with all those who were quietly destined to survive.

Varnacé was generally considered to be a fool who did not know what to do with his money.

"No more of a fool than I am anyway," thought François; "I've ruined my family, all four generations of them. Jacqueline will be free: she'll be able to get married again to some chap like that. It's the least dishonourable thing to do, when one can no longer face up to one's responsibilities..."

His love for Jacqueline was becoming transformed into a sort of debt of honour.

"I owe her that. It's the least I can do... There are two letters to write; one to Maublanc, one to Jacqueline..."

That was it: the dramatic act. Maublanc would retreat before public opinion. Alive, François could expect no help from anyone. Dead, everyone would be on his side.

He walked back across the Place de l'Étoile, taking the shortest route, dodging between the traffic. He was in a hurry. Now he knew what he must do. He walked quickly; the air about him seemed somewhat rarefied; the printed letters had disappeared. There was no more Sonchelles, there was no more anything. Jacqueline, the children...

"Make an end; that's all that's left for me to do now."

As he passed the tomb of the Unknown Soldier, where the little flame flickered beneath the great stone arch, he, who had decided to die, took off his hat from habit. A brassy sunset lit up the roofs of Neuilly. A flock of pigeons took flight. François plunged once more into the uncaring flow of traffic, like a swimmer into a river, and gained the further bank. "If I had not met Varnacé, perhaps I should not have understood. What did he say? I no longer remember. I must not talk to anyone else now. Who have I known that committed suicide?"

He heard once again, strangely close, Lartois's pretentious consultant's voice, as he had heard it during the war in a hospital close to G.H.Q., on a day when François had brought in a fellow-soldier who had shot himself on returning from leave.

"Most people fail to kill themselves," Lartois had said, "because they do not realize that the vital spots are restricted in area. And then they panic as they pull the trigger. Nine times out of ten they miss the heart. And when they attempt the temple, they cut the optic nerve and blind themselves. When they fire into their mouths, they always do it too

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low and only manage to damage a vertebra. You have to shoot high up to get the brain."

François's man had made no mistake. He had died two hours later without regaining consciousness. People had said that he was a coward, that one simply did not commit suicide at the war. How could one know? Perhaps he too had someone whom he must free and she must know it with a certainty that death in battle could not give. If he himself were at this moment to be run over by a motor-car, what use would that be?

"It is always for some reason incomprehensible to others. Can these others understand . . .," these others who were passing so close to him, walking with the tranquil step of the comfortable and content, their eyes opaque as mother-of-pearl beads.

For the first time he no longer judged his wartime comrade's act. On the contrary, he felt a great friendliness for the young man who had killed himself for some incomprehensible reason. He was at one with him in that remote region that exists on the extreme frontiers of the universe of the mind where voluntary death can be conceived.

A clock marked the hour as a quarter to nine.

"They'll be at dinner in the Avenue de Messine," he said to himself.

Suddenly he felt an extraordinary weakness at the thought of his empty place at his mother's left. "When I get home it's going to be so difficult not to go into the dining-room, but to go straight up to my room." And he repeated to himself: "All courage is good for is to help a man to die."

XIV

Dinner in the Avenue de Messine was proceeding in a depressing atmosphere. Noël, having already heard through Albéric Canet that François had been seen talking to Maublanc in the club, was silent, chewing the cud of his anger.

"What's the stupid boy been up to? Hadn't he been stupid enough already? I shall send him abroad, or keep him well in control under my own hand! I shan't allow him to do a single thing on his own and I'll keep his nose to the grindstone. Anyhow, what can he have been up to?"

The Baronne Schoudler, though her husband never allowed her to know anything about his business affairs, felt nevertheless that something was wrong, particularly as Noël had given orders the day before that *L'Information Financière* should be kept from the Patriarch. The Baronne's knowledge of stocks and shares was limited to the great principle: "Buy at the bottom and sell at the top." She belonged to a generation when women did not even know the size of their own incomes.

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Nevertheless, she had looked at the Stock Exchange prices during the afternoon, and had allowed herself to comment to Noël: "Isn't it the moment, dear, to buy Sonchelles since they're so low?"

The giant had given her a nasty look and had replied: "You can keep your good advice for your son, Adèle. He has more need of it than I have."

Jacqueline was nervous. Having been partly informed of the difficulties by François, without altogether understanding them, she was concerned about her husband's health and, more immediately, about his absence. Always quick to worry about him, she was already saying to herself: "As long as nothing has happened to François. He wasn't feeling well . . . I can't understand why he hasn't telephoned."

Partly as a result of her nervousness, she demanded that from now on Jean-Noël should not be taken to dispense charity to the beggars. Miss Mabel had found a flea on the child that very morning. Charity of that kind was unhealthy from every point of view.

Jacqueline knew that mealtimes were not suitable occasions to run counter to the Patriarch's wishes; the process of digestion in that ancient organism involved the circulation in painful travail and sometimes gave rise to unexpected reactions.

Though never lacking in respect towards her husband's family, Jacqueline never cared to conceal for long what she had on her mind; and when she had some truth it seemed good to her to ventilate, she expressed it with all the vivacity of the d'Huisnes and all the haughtiness of the La Monneries, which were in contrast to her small body and delicate features.

Nevertheless, owing to her youth and lack of physical assurance, she could not yet manage to say something unpleasant to someone without turning her gaze on a third person in search of support if not approbation.

As always, it was her mother-in-law who supported her. The child might really catch anything . . .

The Baronne fell silent. The Patriarch had turned purple. Huge veins were swelling on his forehead. Anger shone beneath his watery eyelids.

"I am still the head of this family," he cried, "and it's not . . . humph . . . this chit of a girl, nor you, Adèle! . . ."

And he threw the piece of toast in his hand straight at his daughter-in-law. He breathed hoarsely and ground his false teeth.

"Nothing . . . nothing . . . nothing," he shouted without any apparent relevance to his preceding words.

The butler stood stock-still, holding the roast beef suspended in mid-air.

Noël's hand rapped the cloth.

"Can't you let my father have his meals in peace, and me too for

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that matter? Do you think we've nothing else to worry about?" he said, making no effort to control his anger. "If necessary I'll impose silence while my father has his food."

His breathing was noisy and his fingers moved to his collar.

Jacqueline was about to reply tartly that it would be much simpler if she went out for her meals; but her mother-in-law looked sorrowfully at her. Trapped between the flickering life of the Patriarch and the pretended heart-disease of the giant, the two women were silent.

"And anyway, why isn't François here?" asked old Siegfried after a moment or two.

"He might have had the decency to let us know," Noël grumbled. "We're not a restaurant."

Jacqueline, deciding to say no more, managed to give her silence an air of disapproval. She had just caught a glance exchanged between the butler and the footman and said to herself that this kind of scene could never have taken place before the servants in the La Monneries' house. "We set some store by our servants' respect." François was undoubtedly the only Schoudler who had any dignity; he was really unexpectedly nice considering his family. But what could he be doing at this time of day?

The front door banged.

"It must be him," said the Baronne.

Listening, Jacqueline thought she recognized her husband's step on the front stairs, then decided that she must be mistaken.

Dinner progressed in a silence broken only by the noise of knives and forks. Jacqueline hardly ate anything at all. An innocent phrase of the Baronne Schoudler's about one of their Jewish relations sent the Patriarch, who had misheard her, into a fit of anger.

"My father was already converted, and I was . . . humph . . . baptized at birth," he shouted. "But we have never denied our origins . . . humph . . . although since then we have always married Catholic wives!"

At that moment there was a sudden noise somewhere in the house beyond the thick walls and numerous rooms.

"What's going on?" asked Noël. "It must be in the kitchen . . ."

A moment later Jérémie, the old valet, came into the room, his face pale, his hands trembling. He went straight to Noël and whispered in his ear.

The giant turned pale, threw down his napkin and rushed from the room.

Jacqueline felt an irrational anguish, as if an iron bar were being twisted in her chest; she dashed out behind her father-in-law, closely followed by the Baronne Schoudler.

"What, am I being left all alone?" demanded the Patriarch.

Noël, standing with widespread arms at the door of François's room,

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cried: "No, don't go in, my dear. For God's sake don't go in! Nor you either, Adèle!"

Jacqueline brushed past the giant.

François's body had fallen across the foot of the bed, his head thrown back, his mouth open and bleeding. On emerging, the bullet had broken a picture on the wall. François had fired high. There were two sealed letters on the table. Jacqueline heard an animal squealing; it was her own voice.

xv

Of the two letters François had left, Noël Schoudler abstracted the one addressed to Lucien Maublanc and, when he had read it, immediately burnt it. Afterwards he always affirmed that his son had only written one letter, and that for Jacqueline.

Though Noël made every effort to keep the suicide quiet, the news, owing to the indiscretions of the servants, was all over the town by early morning. The atmosphere at the Bourse was as dramatic as if the dissolution of the Chamber had been decided on during the night. No one could talk of anything but young Schoudler's suicide. It was attributed to a variety of different causes: unfortunate speculation in sugar, heavy gambling in foreign exchanges, irregularities in accountancy to cover a compromising situation. All that had been whispered in the preceding days now received tragic confirmation, and the worst prognostications were allowable: there was no doubt that they were going to see the greatest financial failure since the end of the war.

"But it was obvious!" said those who always wish to make out that they have foreseen catastrophe. "The Leroy's are not fools. If they've been selling out at a loss for some days, they must have their reasons. Besides, there have been various indications for a long time now. What did the father go to America for, eh? Will you tell me that?"

The principal stockbrokers and the representatives of the big private banks contented themselves with nodding their heads without answering, merely conferring in whispers with a few intimate friends, preparing their plan of campaign.

The panic had already invaded the business world. The iron and steel manufacturers, who formed the principal customers of the Schoudler Bank, were already making massive withdrawals in the Rue des Petits-Champs, and these were beginning to embarrass the cash reserves of the Bank.

It was then, a few minutes before midday, that Noël Schoudler appeared on the great staircase of the Bourse. He mounted the steps, huge, a little bent, leaning with one hand on a stick and with the other on the arm of his stockbroker, Albéric Canet, a little thin wizened man who looked as if he had been cut out of a sheet of paper.

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From the crowded courtyard, where the outside brokers transacted their business, there was rising already, during the nervous moments of waiting before the bell rang, a sound of tumult that was soon to grow, swell and ring out across the whole quarter of the town.

Through the general clamour a sudden murmur could be heard, Stockbrokers caught each other by the arm, saying: "It's Schoudler! There's Schoudler! Look, Schoudler!"

He was pale and his swollen eyelids were red from a night of sorrow and insomnia; his black tie disappeared into the opening of his waistcoat which was lined with a white slip.

He had no difficulty in making his way through the crowd; it opened before him out of the respect that all major catastrophes inspire. He entered the great hall with its hideous frescoes, its coats of arms of the main cities with stock exchanges, looking like tourist advertisements, its square columns, its barriers separating the various groups, its altar-like platforms, its information-boards hung up like time-tables, and the dull light falling from the windows on the black-coated crowd, all of which made it look like a disused railway station given over to some depressing religious cult.

Noel had not been seen at the Bourse for fifteen years. To many he seemed a ghost; to others, the younger members, he was like the sudden incarnation of a myth. The old giant, bearing all the signs of both wealth and suffering, come in person to defend himself and hold his own, aroused admiration in spite of everything.

Noël advanced slowly. He raised his eyes to the board of quotations: "*Sonchelles . . . closed at 1840.*" What would they open at?

To an old man who spoke to him, he said simply: "You're betraying me!"

He made a few brief remarks to right and left; and everyone tried to find in them some hidden meaning, some menace or some admission of defeat.

Despite his feeling and all the calculations that were occupying his mind, Noël still felt moved by the scene and the place which recalled a far-distant period of his life. He began to stoop less and some colour came back into his cheeks.

As Albéric Canet was about to enter the *corbeille*, the circular space in the centre of the hall reserved for brokers who dealt in futures, Noël took him by the arm.

"You'll support me to the bitter end, Albéric?" he asked.

The little man's expression did not waver beneath the giant's searching scrutiny.

"I owe you everything, Noël, you and your father," he replied. "I'll go just as far as I can."

Then, the shortest among his colleagues, he went and took up his position against the red velvet-covered balustrade, where the brokers,

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dressed in smart well-pressed suits, gold chains spanning their waist-coats, were leaning as if against a well-head. Albéric Canet threw his half-smoked cigarette onto the conical head of clear sand that was renewed every day. It filled the bottom of the *corbeille* and was satirically referred to as "the brokers' grave." He looked up at the clock whose two hands were almost aligned.

The bell rang.

"I hold Sonchelles! I hold Sonchelles!" Maublanc's broker shouted at once, his body bent, his arm extended, his open palm turned upwards.

At once a huge clamour arose all over the hall, like a wave hurling itself into a deep cave. The daily frenzy had fallen on the initiates of the melancholy cult, as they stood at their various altars, the outside brokers in the courtyard making more noise than all the rest of the Bourse put together. Wherever one looked there were open, violent, voracious mouths, waving hands, fingers endeavouring to supplement impotent vocal cords, a sort of telegraph of the deaf and dumb... The markers in their overalls, standing above the hysteria, sponged their black slates, marking up new figures in chalk and immediately wiping them off again.

Separated from the rush of minor officiators, and by the mere fact of their inferior numbers appearing the more calm, the high priests, their stomachs pushed against the red-velvet barrier, discussed the figures which were being transmitted to the markers, shouted into telephones, and appearing in lights on the electrical indicators.

"I hold Sonchelles!... I hold Sonchelles!... How much?"

They started at 1550 with four thousand on offer.

Noël Schoudler, standing to one side of the circular barrier that surrounded the open space of the *corbeille*, was head and shoulders above a group of clerks and messengers, who were constantly sent running through the mob to return with documents and telegrams. From time to time, calling an attendant to him, Noël sent for Albéric Canet, whispered into his ear or slipped him a piece of paper. Canet covered his notebook with microscopic figures, raised the corners of the slips of paper in the palm of his hand, and sent his clerks running. One had the impression that his whole staff was employed in executing the giant's orders.

François's suicide had let loose a panic that Maublanc's offensive alone could never have caused; and grim news kept arriving as to the magnitude of the withdrawals in the Rue des Petits-Champs.

The shares of the Schoudler Bank started falling; so did the Zoa mines on the floor of the house. At first it was in these two fields that Noël defended himself, forcing the price up by fifty francs, letting it fall again, forcing it up again, fighting panic with millions at a time. On such a day he could never have directed his minute-by-minute operations from his office, he needed to deploy his reserves to the best advantage and use the prestige of his massive presence.

But the refineries were still falling within the *corbeille*, amid increasing pandemonium.

"I hold Sonchelles! . . . How many? . . . Eight hundred . . . Twelve hundred . . . I'll take at 1420 . . . I'll take at 1400 . . . How many? . . . Five hundred, at 1400, taken! . . . Sonchelles! How many? Two thousand . . . I'll take at 1350, 1350, two hundred, taken! . . . Sonchelles, I hold Sonchelles . . ."

They were flooding the market, the demand was lessening. The figures were altering rapidly on the electric boards. Some of the brokers were dealing only by signals, their hands opening and clenching.

"Take me to Monsieur Canet's telephone-box," said Noël to a messenger.

In the square room next to the great hall were some forty identical little cages ranged along the walls. They contained men of every age bawling into telephones, each with a similarly lined forehead, and the protruding shifty eye of a panic-stricken insect in a cell. Above one of these cages was a brass plate bearing the name of his broker. The giant shut himself into it, became one of the line of black insects, but larger than the others as if seen through a magnifying glass.

"Gutenberg 462 . . . No, Mademoiselle, Gutenberg . . . Gu-ten-berg . . . Yes, two," cried Noël Schoudler.

The great clamour still sounded from beyond the glass door of the telephone-box.

"Hullo, is that you, Muller?" he said, lowering his voice. "You must bring out a special issue at once, as quickly as possible. What about? I don't care a damn. Whatever's in the telegrams . . . A riot in Bombay? That'll do! And then on the first page the account of my son's death. I've nothing to hide. I want to announce it before the others. And send the first copies to the Bourse. The boys must be here in an hour's time at latest, do you understand; they *must!*"

He looked at his watch. The Bank in the Rue des Petits-Champs would have closed as usual half an hour ago. It wouldn't open again till three o'clock in the afternoon. Three hours from now . . . His thoughts moved in four or five directions at once.

As he came out of the box he thought he must have been seized with deafness, for the great clamour from the hall seemed to have diminished, become veiled, almost extinguished. But it was not he who was weakening, it was worse than that, it was the Bourse.

On all sides dealing had almost ceased. And Noël recognized the stupor that supervened on days of catastrophe, when the brokers gazed at each other wondering what they had brought about, and what repercussions it would have on each one of themselves. Maublanc's broker obstinately continued to cry, "I hold Sonchelles . . ." but without conviction.

Everyone was holding them; ten people had just offered them, throw-

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ing their offers across the red balustrade, across the "brokers' grave," now strewn with cigarette-butts, into the well, into oblivion . . . There were no more takers.

Noël Schoudler had never imagined that they would fall so low, that he would be obliged to fight his way up from such a depth, if indeed he could fight his way up. He returned to the circular balustrade, and with two fingers made a sign to Albéric Canet that meant: "Go ahead!" He knew that from now on he had but a thin chance of success.

"I'll take at 1270 . . . How many? . . . I'll take! I'll take! I'll take!" It was Albéric's dry voice. In a few seconds he had bought eight thousand at 1270 francs.

The Chairman of the Bourse Committee, an elderly man with a rosy face and exquisitely curled white hair, took Albéric Canet gently by the sleeve and led him a little aside.

"You know, my dear friend, that the whole Committee is jointly and separately liable," he said in a low voice. "I am therefore asking you very confidentially whether you are covered. Because if you are not, I fear I shall be compelled . . ."

"I have realized twenty-five millions of my private fortune so as to be completely secure," replied Albéric Canet in the same low voice.

"Oh, in that case . . ."

Loyalty, devotion, and motives of sentiment are not common among members of the Bourse. The Chairman shook his head with an expression of admiring incomprehension in face of this almost unexampled act. "Unless of course he's being incredibly clever . . ." he seemed to be thinking.

Noël Schoudler had watched the conversation and had guessed its meaning.

"If Albéric fails me . . .", he thought. And at that moment he thought of his son and added silently, speaking to that still near spirit: "My boy, my boy, help me now!"

The broker was white-faced when he returned to the velvet balustrade.

It was barely half-past one when the first newsboys of *L'Echo du Matin* reached the great staircase, their shirts unbuttoned, the peaks of their caps broken, their arms blackened with fresh printers' ink.

"Special edition! Riots in Bombay! Two hundred dead! Special edition!" At the bottom of the front page, surrounded by a thick black rule, was a photograph of François Schoudler together with an article in italics. "*A tragic accident yesterday evening resulted in the death of . . .*"

The official version, authenticated by Professor Lartois, "*a member of the Académie Française, who was at once called in,*" established that the unfortunate young man had been mortally wounded while cleaning a firearm. Every effort to save his life had been vain. There

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followed a long eulogy of François, of his bravery in the war, of his talents as a business man, of the quality he had shown while managing director of the Sonchelles refineries, and expressing the shocked horror of the newspaper's staff and its sympathy.

The battle over Sonchelles had been joined again.

"I'll take at 1280! I'll take at 1290! I'll take at 1320!"

Noël breathed again. Albéric Canet had kept his word.

Dealing continued. People began to look questioningly at each other. Was Schoudler holding out? And if he was, then . . .

Maublanc's broker made another attempt to force down the price, but in vain. The demand was constant and the other sellers raised their prices. Some of the previous sellers now became purchasers. And Canet continued to buy and buy . . . 1400, 1430 . . . the figures clocked up in the lights on the wall. The battle was moving into the enemies' territory.

L'Echo du Matin was passing from hand to hand.

Now that his son's death was announced and attributed to a cause that could be admitted, the members could do no other than express their sympathy to Schoudler.

"We didn't know," they said . . . "we've just read about it. It's appalling. I admire your courage in such circumstances . . ."

"Yes, it's appalling, it's appalling," the giant repeated.

And the others went away perplexed, discussing their impressions. After all, the son might well have killed himself over some love-affair!

As for the capital supposedly refused by the Leroys, what truth was there in that? Had the old shark perhaps used his son's death for the furtherance of his plans?

No, really, he can't have steered so near the wind for fun. There must be something else behind it all.

"What are Sonchelles standing at at the moment?"

"Fifteen hundred."

"What did I tell you! Anyway, he's pretty tough. He belongs to another generation. People haven't got guts like that today."

At a quarter to two Sonchelles stood at 1550, and were at that price when the Bourse closed. Something like twenty thousand shares had changed hands, and Lulu Maublanc's broker knew that his client had taken a knock.

When Noël and Albéric Canet went out down the great stairs, they were both tired with a heavy, physical, muscular fatigue. The agent's voice was hoarse and his ears still echoed with shouted orders. But he was proud of himself and breathed the sunlit air feeling that, in this paved space, he was in the country. Noël was mopping his neck with his handkerchief. People looked at them with deference as great men.

They examined their figures. They had come out with a profit which would be doubled when, in two or three days' time, the shares in the

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natural course of things rose to round about 2,000. The operation conceived by Noël had succeeded in spite of everything.

"But in a great part thanks to you, Albéric. I realize that," he said.

"It was touch and go," the broker replied simply.

The cleaners were beginning to collect the papers on the steps. The pages of the *Echo du Matin*, crumpled, trodden on, were strewn over the stone, with François's face in its mourning border.

"Yes, touch and go . . ." said Noël Schoudler, bowing his head. "But what's the use of all this now, my dear Albéric? Who am I doing it all for?"

He put his heavy hand across his eyes.

"For your grandchildren, your wife, your family," Albéric Canet replied. "And for your dependants, your employees, for the sake of everything you have created, for your own sake. You couldn't let yourself be destroyed! But of course I understand, it's not the same thing!"

"No, no, it's no longer the same now," Noël repeated, allowing himself to be led to his car.

XVI

François's funeral took place two days later. The senior parish priest had previously gone to see Noël Schoudler. The priest with his lank body and slender hands was considerably embarrassed by what he had to say. It had been said . . . there had been rumour, doubtless the result of mischievous gossip, that suggested . . . To cut short his own sentences, the priest made a little clicking noise with the tip of his tongue against his teeth.

Noël asked him coldly if Professor Lartois's declaration on the accidental death of François was not sufficient, and whether the signature of that eminent Academician was one that could be questioned. Noël also informed him that absolution would most certainly be given by Father de Granvilage, a near cousin of the La Monneries, who always officiated for them and for their family connections.

When he heard the name of the Provincial of the Dominicans, the priest climbed down.

"Oh, in that case, in that case, of course . . ." he said.

And he began praising the Order's merits and, he added, looking at the Banker out of the corner of his eye, "its broadmindedness." It was of course a very rich order, indeed extremely rich!

"May I venture to observe, Monsieur le Baron, that the aristocracy and the rich families of Paris seem to concentrate their benefactions on the Society of Jesus and the Order of St Dominic, who are of course infinitely worthy—oh, most worthy!—while the secular clergy, whose lot is often hard and who have heavy expenses to face, are assisted in the main by the middle-classes and the poor. Not that the gifts of the

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latter are contemptible, nothing could be further from my thoughts! Has not the Lord said that the widow's mite . . ."

Noël Schoudler could not get out of it without promising the parish church a sum of money for a statue of St Thérèse in memory of François.

"Do you know that we are one of the last parishes in Paris not to have our little rose of Lisieux?" said the priest. "The Dean of the Chapter was only remarking on it the other day. And I know that many of our parishioners are most distressed about it. I feel certain that that wonderful saint, so full of love for the young, will intercede with Our Lord for the soul of your dear son."

He went off, sucking his teeth, delighted with his negotiations.

There was a large attendance at the ceremony. It was one of the biggest funerals of the year. Three generations of Parisians met there. The young, ordinarily so few in these circumstances, were in a majority. A number of young men like Paul de Varnacé, who would undoubtedly have refused to lend François fifty thousand francs if he had been ruined, demonstrated the sincerity of their sorrow by the gravity of their expressions. Such an outrageous blow of fate touched them personally and seemed at once absurd and inexplicable. But death seems always inexplicable when it strikes down the young. With bandaged eyes death had erupted into the generation that had reached its thirties in the years 1920 to 1922.

"I saw him only an hour before," said Varnacé. "He seemed perfectly normal."

Everyone tried to find some valid reason for the suicide, some premonitory sign that might also reassure them.

"He was a good deal knocked up by his war-wound," some said.

"Even before that," said an army contemporary of François, "I remember a steeplechase on the racecourse at Verrie, just at the end of our course at Saumur. His horse fell at a big jump. That night François was in a state of complete collapse! He was always a nervous type."

They were like investigators examining the burnt-out wreck of an aeroplane to determine why it had lost flying speed.

The catafalque was a black milestone raised on their road, recording the distance between birth and death. It marked another stage. There were many of François's friends gathered in the church who thought of those first white hairs beginning to appear at their temples, or of the recent disastrous termination of a love-affair, or of the difficulties they saw hedging their lives about; and each thought that the sensation of youth they still bore within them, though they had already ceased to recognize it in others, was an illusion from now on.

The women, for whom François Schoudler, over a period of ten years, had successively been the much sought-after dancing partner, the

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coveted match, the hero, and ultimately the possible lover, hid their pretty teeth behind closed, grave lips, and, as they looked at the men, imagined, by identifying themselves with her, what Jacqueline's grief must be.

But indeed Jacqueline's state of mind surpassed their imaginings. She did not attend the funeral. She was in the charge of a nurse at the Avenue de Messine. She refused food, refused to see visitors, refused even to speak. Her dry, burning eyes were buried in the pillow; she lay stretched on her bed and longed to die.

From time to time she succumbed to a fit of hysteria, screamed like a dog that has been run over or like a woman in childbirth. And indeed these were the two pains she seemed to feel: in the first place a marble weight of darkness crushing her, and then the burgeoning of her own death which she laboured ceaselessly in the depths of her entrails and her heart to bring into the world.

Jacqueline had lost all sense of the passage of time; she did not know that at this very moment, before François's catafalque, Father de Granvilage was officiating, his white habit shining the more brightly against the black funeral trappings, surrounded with episcopal deference, the parish priest fluttering about him like a fly about a lump of sugar. She did not know that it was now three days since she had slept.

Her thoughts existed only in the profound depths of her subconscious. One of the few sentences that she had been heard to say was: "Surely it's impossible not to die when you want to so much!"

Her longing seemed to be about to come true when she felt her heart cease to beat and total night envelop her brain. And then, thrown back into life by a fit of hysteria, she stammered, "François, François!" for minutes at a time, her arms extended towards an eternity that was visible to her alone.

Rarely had a family received so much heartfelt sympathy and so much praise of the deceased as did the Schoudler family that morning at the sacristy door. The Patriarch, in his newest tail-coat, which dated back some thirty years, recognized no one and bowed his long moustaches. Jérémie, the valet, stood behind him in case the old man should turn faint; but not at all, his desiccated muscles and hardened arteries proved still perfectly capable of bearing the physical ordeal of standing; his daily almsgiving to the poor of the parish had trained him in endurance.

He felt only dimly the loss of his grandson, and even the funerary paraphernalia failed to upset him.

His abnormal longevity, his red-rimmed eyes staring at a young man's coffin, seemed to convey some uncomfortable truth like a text from the Bible.

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Jean-Noël and Marie-Ange also had their guardian behind them in the person of Miss Mabel, whose duty it was to watch over them and take them to and fro. Marie-Ange wore the dress made for the funeral of her La Monnerie grandfather, which had merely had to have a tuck let out.

The two children were more frightened than sad. "It's Papa under there," they said to each other as they looked at the catafalque.

Noël Schoudler suddenly saw among the crowding heads Lucien Maublanc's cranium. He had come to enjoy his triumph. It had cost him dear enough, nearly ten millions dropped on the Bourse in those last forty-eight hours. He could at least allow himself this satisfaction.

"Oh, yes, they're hard hit, very hard hit, those Schoudler ruffians. I bring bad luck to people who try to do me down," he thought as he moved slowly forward with the crowd.

"I really must not create a scandal," thought Noël in a gust of rage. "But to dare . . . to dare to come here . . ."

"All my sympathy, my poor dear fellow," said Lulu Maublanc.

The two old men, who had crushed a boy full of life and plans in the cogs of their financial machine, shook irreconcilable hands.

"I'll skin you, I'll skin you . . . You can count on that!" the giant thought as he looked straight into Lulu's cloudy eyes.

XVII

They were silent as they returned from the cemetery to the Avenue de Messine. The Baronne Schoudler cried behind her veil, sobbing ceaselessly. The Patriarch dozed. Noël seemed to be submerged in thoughts that he had no intention of communicating, and from time to time mopped his neck inside his collar with his handkerchief. The children, still frightened, surrounded with crêpe, starched shirt-fronts, tears and silence, hardly dared even look at each other.

To all of them, to the grandparents as well as to the children, the house seemed different, as if the air within it had taken on a new consistency, an altered resonance. They seemed to look with new eyes at the dimensions of the rooms, to notice the worn patches where the carpets were most frequently trodden.

"When was that console-table moved?" Noël asked.

"It hasn't been moved," replied the Baronne, raising her tear-stained face to her husband.

She felt like a sort of elderly orphan who had no happiness to look forward to, and whose sorrow would never grow less.

"Yes, it has, it was against the other panel," Noël insisted.

"Oh, but that was a long time ago! Quite in the early days of our marriage."

The Baronne sighed deeply and then cried aloud: "But how could

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it have happened, Noël? How? Was he unhappy and said nothing about it? Didn't we perhaps do everything we could for him?"

Suicide is the form of death which, more than any other, gives everyone connected with it a feeling of guilt. And everyone in the house, masters and servants, felt guilty. Even the children wondered whether the game they had played a few days ago had not been visited with punishment by God. Noël turned away his head without answering and went and shut himself up in the study with the green leather walls.

As he removed the Patriarch's boots and socks, Jérémie paused in contemplation of the old gnarled foot, which looked like a root; amid the network of veins and calloused skin, he noticed a spot that had not been there before.

"I fear that Monsieur le Baron has a corn," he said.

"Really," said the Patriarch, "that's the last straw!"

During the course of the evening Lartois came to see Jacqueline again and emerged from her room looking concerned.

"Is it true," Noël asked him, "that people really die of a broken heart?"

"Well, my dear fellow, it does happen, and indeed fairly often," the doctor replied. "It even occurs among certain species of animals. Take bullfinches for instance: when one of a couple dies, the other stops singing, its feathers lose their lustre, it hardly eats, and then, one morning, you'll find it lying dead at the bottom of its cage. And the poor girl seems to me rather like a bullfinch. However, I hope we'll pull her through; I'm giving her injections but it's something of a battle. It's very difficult to save a patient who has no desire to live; you get no co-operation. She may have a stroke, it's quite possible. But let's wait till tomorrow. But how about you, my dear fellow, how are you standing up to the shock? Any particular troubles?"

Noël Schoudler suddenly realized that his heart disease had left him completely in peace during these successive crises.

"I must admit," he replied, "that I have had no time to think of myself. All the same, I'm astonished at my own resilience."

"I've always told you that you were made of granite," Lartois said.

During the night, however, the giant suffered from insomnia. Not a painful insomnia, but merely a prolonged state of lucid wakefulness. His mind was a hive of thought.

"In the normal course I shall become the guardian of my grandchildren," he said to himself. "I must hang on till Jean-Noël is old enough to be initiated into the business and Marie-Ange married. How old shall I be then? Eighty-three or eighty-four, I suppose. It'll be hard going to last out till then! I hoped that François, as soon as he had a bit more experience, would replace me! I shall have to hold on for an extra generation."

Wearing a dressing-gown, he rose from his chair and wandered

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through the wide corridors of the house. It was one o'clock in the morning. He opened the door of François's room, and switched on the light. There was a scream from the bed. Jacqueline was lying in the exact place in which François had been found dead three nights earlier. She had dragged herself there in a semi-hypnotic state.

The nurse appeared, panic-stricken, through the communicating door. "I can't think what's happened," she stuttered. "I was tired . . . I heard nothing."

"Very well, but try to be a little more efficient," said Noël harshly. "Go and make yourself some coffee, if you need it. Luckily I wasn't asleep!"

He picked up Jacqueline in his arms and was surprised to find her so light. "Like a bullfinch," Lartois had said. Her disordered hair, matted by fever, had fallen over her eyes. She was delirious and kept saying: "François! François! Leave me with François," shaking her father-in-law's huge shoulders with her convulsive trembling. Through her nightdress he was aware of the thin, naked body quivering, the body of his son's wife, and he felt a certain unease as if he had touched something sacred and taboo, as if he had been compelled to commit some involuntary desecration.

When he had taken her back to her room, he returned to his son's and found what he wanted, files piled up on the flap of a desk, then went back along the corridors, followed by his own huge shadow, saying to himself: "It was Maublanc, that bastard Maublanc! . . . Of course, if I had told him . . . But I couldn't know that he was so sensitive! He took too much after his mother."

Going to his room, he placed the files on a table, and listened to the silence that had fallen over the house. No sound came from beyond the dividing wall where lay the Baronne Schoudler's room. "Poor Adèle's asleep," he thought. "Just as well; she needs it. And I hope Jacqueline's gone to sleep too. The nurse said she would give her a sleeping-draught. And my old father's asleep. And the children are asleep. And I shall work alone in this great house whose only support I am. That is how it should be. I must sort all François's papers, see what should be kept, what destroyed . . ."

For a long time he searched through the blue folders, from time to time frowning at an indecipherable word, or taking a note. *Sonchelles* . . . *orders for machinery*; *sports grounds*; the plans must all be completed . . . He took his head in his hands and pushed the *Sonchelles* file to one side. "I'll look at that later . . . *L'Echo du Matin* . . . what plans had he for *L'Echo*?"

He read the haphazard notes. "*News must be direct, precise and immediate. The reader must have the feeling that everything that is happening in the world . . . The literary editor's department must be moved to the room on the second floor . . . The whole of the last page should be photographs.*"

THE FAMILY COUNCIL

Lulu hated staying away in the country, watering places and the seaside. In August, as in December, he cared for nothing but the Boulevards, his club and night-clubs. For ten years he had been no further than Saint-Germain-en-Laye, and then only for the day. He must clearly have been much concerned for Sylvaine's health!

"The change of air will do the girl good," he said.

He hired an enormous yellow Hispano-Suiza for the journey. The same way he kept on saying to the chauffeur: "Don't drive so fast, taste drive so fast! Madame is in an interesting condition. Take care He'd bumps."

He month spent at Deauville was far from being what Sylvaine had "Monday Lulu forbade her to dance, bathe or walk in the sun. She decide on to remain long hours resting on the balcony of her hotel bed-plan a new thing the crowd on the front and the yachts racing across the introduction. No other distraction but unscrewing the silver-gilt stoppers *Petit Parisien*, and then screwing them on again.

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by giving them all a tier to a shop and buy her a bag or a scarf, per-

He was once more always put everything right. Left alone, Sylvaine eternity before him to hold in her hands and said to herself: "I've got businessmen and its Paris theatre, money, a flat, a maid, jewels, and

"Oh, I've missed my voca-

Minister! And yet, I don't know the Casino till three o'clock in the stronger than they are." baccarat table, always drawing to a

He heard a sound of sobbing throwing a considerable cheque at the room. It interrupted the trend of his thoughts.

"Well, what is it? What's the matter you," he would remark to whose impatience made the silence of the street a lot of money! But no

But he immediately added: "Oh, of course.

Adèle; I was busy working for you all."

return.

"my dear child," he

he saw its term

CHAPTER FIVE

once, one

The Family Council

EVERY morning between nine and ten, if he had not drunk too much the night before, Lulu Maublanc called at the Rue de Naples, his bowler hat perched high on his head, his stick swinging.

Sylvaine Dual, wearing a rose-satin wrap, her red hair in a tangle, received him in bed, saying: "I've had the morning sickness again."

"Excellent, excellent. I'm really delighted!" cried Lulu.

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When he had taken her back to her room, he had stated positively and found what he wanted, files piled up on the table. He now do nothing but con- went back along the corridors, followed by a crowd of concerned. She took advan- ing to himself: "It was Maubland, the doctor's cravings": a brooch, a ring, or a course, if I had told him . . . But I could not. In the middle of summer. tive! He took too much after his mother," she said to herself, "but, O Lord,

Going to his room, he placed himself in the silence that had fallen over the house. The signs were indisputable. He was merely dividing wall where lay the signs of Sylvaine should remain so thin. asleep," he thought. "Family!" she replied. "In my mother it wasn't line's gone to sleep to draught. And my mother's fifth month."

I shall work alone. From then on, that he was perfectly normally sexed, how it should behave as normal men do by taking on an understudy kept, what doctor's was pregnant. He found another "little lady . . . very

For a . . . very discreet" whom he went to see near the Park Mont- . . . at about half-past ten, when he left Sylvaine, and to whom he gave folded banknotes when he had allowed his cuff to dally a little beneath the sheet. But she hardly counted; it was more a question of manly dignity.

When Sylvaine learnt of it, she had an appalling scene with the old man assuring him through her tears that it was enough "to bring on an accident."

He succeeded in more or less calming her down by giving her a dressing-case, whose bottles had silver-gilt stoppers. The dressing-case aroused in Sylvaine a desire to use it; she persuaded Lulu to take her to Deauville.

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Lulu hated staying away in the country, watering places and the seaside. In August, as in December, he cared for nothing but the Boulevards, his club and night-clubs. For ten years he had been no further than Saint-Germain-en-Laye, and then only for the day. He must clearly have been much concerned for Sylvaine's health!

"The change of air will do the girl good," he said.

He hired an enormous yellow Hispano-Suiza for the journey. The whole way he kept on saying to the chauffeur: "Don't drive so fast, don't drive so fast! Madame is in an interesting condition. Take care to avoid bumps."

The month spent at Deauville was far from being what Sylvaine had imagined. Lulu forbade her to dance, bathe or walk in the sun. She was made to remain long hours resting on the balcony of her hotel bedroom, watching the crowd on the front and the yachts racing across the sea. She had no other distraction but unscrewing the silver-gilt stoppers of her dressing-case and then screwing them on again.

"But, Lulu, I shall go mad!" she said.

So he would take her to a shop and buy her a bag or a scarf, persuaded that a present always put everything right. Left alone, Sylvaine sometimes took her head in her hands and said to herself: "I've got everything. Success in the theatre, money, a flat, a maid, jewels, and I'm so unhappy!"

As for Lulu, he remained in the Casino till three o'clock in the morning, chewing a cigar at the baccarat table, always drawing to a five "on principle," and regularly signing a considerable cheque at the money-changer's desk on departure.

"You see how much I'm spending on you," he would remark to Sylvaine. "Oh, these holidays are costing me a lot of money! But no matter!"

She talked to him about wanting a part on their return.

"In your condition? You mustn't think of it, my dear child," he cried. "It would be madness!"

The lie could not be prolonged indefinitely and Sylvaine saw its term approaching.

As soon as they returned to Paris, she went and took refuge, one night, in Anny Féret's bed.

"A million! Do you understand, Anny, millions slipping through my fingers because of this blasted child I can't have!" she groaned. "Promised, signed, guaranteed! After that I could have sent Lulu packing, and I'd have been comfortable for the rest of my life. You must admit some people have no luck!"

She began to sob.

"Now, now, my dear, calm down," said Anny Féret, pulling the red head down on her expansive bosom with its mauve nipples.

Her Lesbianism was distinctly maternal.

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"Oh, old Anny's always there in bad times," she went on. "When everything's going well, no one bothers about her; that's life."

"And when he finds out that I've been playing him up," said Sylvaine, "it'll be simply terrible!"

"Oh, well, he believes in the child; he'll believe just as much in a miscarriage."

"Yes, but what about the million!"

They lay there a moment with their legs interlaced, while Anny Féret, an arm beneath her head, philosophized.

"Life's hell," she said. "There are so many women who have babies they don't want, and now just because you do want one . . . It's hell."

Suddenly, she sat up and seized Sylvaine by her thin shoulders.

"I've got it, my dear, I've got the answer!" she cried.

"What?"

"I've got it. The girl in the cloakroom at the Carnaval. She's a new one, you don't know her . . ."

"Well?"

"She's three months gone. The time'll fit near enough. She doesn't know how to get rid of it. You've only got to give her fifty thousand francs; it'll be an un hoped-for windfall as far as she's concerned. I'm quite sure she'd play, even for nothing."

"Do you think it can be fixed?" said Sylvaine in perplexity. "How are you going to manage it so that it won't be known?"

"Simplicity itself," said Anny. "Leave it to me. I'll fix it all up in no time."

"Oh, Anny, Anny," cried Sylvaine; "if you can manage this for me, I promise to go halves with you!"

"Don't make promises you won't keep, my sweet," replied Anny. "But if you would like to give me fifty thousand too, well and good! It would at any rate put a little butter on my bread. But, you know, your old Anny's a pretty simple old thing."

And she slowly turned towards Sylvaine's hopelessly flat belly.

Ten days later Sylvaine left for the south. The doctor had advised a Mediterranean climate till the end of her pregnancy. But she must not be by the seaside, it was "bad for the nerves"; nor must she be in a town. She required absolute rest. In short, the doctor had himself chosen the locality, which was near Grasse, where he had a colleague who could be relied on.

"Why don't you come with me?" Sylvaine said hypocritically to Lulu. "Six months together in the country, no one but ourselves! A tiny little village, with cattle walking in the streets. A delicious smell of cow-dung . . ."

"Oh no, no!" he replied horrified. "In the first place I can't leave

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my business affairs, I must keep an eye on the Bourse. No; you must be very sensible, my dear child, very good, and go without me."

"Well, at least you must give me a nice trunk, so that I'll be surrounded only by things that you have given me, darling Lulu."

"Yes, of course, if you'd like one. Listen, let's go and choose one in the Avenue de l'Opéra. A pigskin one."

The following day Sylvaine said that she had found a friend to accompany her, one whom Lulu was astonished he did not know.

"But yes, of course you do . . . Fernande! I've mentioned her to you a hundred times," said Sylvaine. "Of course I must say that, since I've been with you, I never see anyone outside the theatre. It's lucky she's free, and that she wants to go. Because all alone, you know . . ."

Lulu took Sylvaine to the station. He was wearing a pale grey bowler hat.

"Now be careful of yourself, very careful of yourself!" he repeated a dozen times.

He helped her to climb the step into the carriage, and went back to take up his position beneath the window. He had taken off his hat, and tapped Sylvaine's fingers with it as she leaned on the nickel-plated bar. The "friend" remained discreetly in the further corner of the compartment.

"And when I come back . . ." Sylvaine said.

He pretended to dandle a child in the crook of his arm.

For the first time she detected some sign of emotion on the old bachelor's deformed, waxen face; a sort of condensation, as on a cold window-pane, seemed to be forming in his cloudy eyes.

Sylvaine felt inexplicably moved.

"You'll write to me?" she asked.

"Yes, of course, a letter every week, I promise!"

She waved him a kiss with her fingertips; he smiled, stood back and watched the train leave, waving his hat.

"The child adores me," he thought.

People jostled him. He was not aware of it.

II

Dijon, Lyons, Valence . . .

The "friend" had never been in a sleeper before. Nor had Sylvaine for that matter. But comfort and luxury had become the normal conditions of life for her. Pride prevented Fernande from sleeping and she heard the porters shouting the names of the stations till dawn.

Toulon . . . Fernande had never seen the sea. She uttered a cry as she raised the blind.

"Well, if someone had told me about this a fortnight ago . . . No, I really can't believe it!" she kept on repeating.

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"It's quite different from Deauville," Sylvaine said casually.

Nice. A hired car. Grasse. A rough, jolting road which gave off a yellow dust . . . Saint-André-des-Colombes . . .

On arrival, the two travellers had exchanged identities. The "friend" called herself from then on Sylvia Duval, alias Sylvaine Dual, dramatic artist, and Sylvaine had become Fernande Metillet, without profession.

The village had nothing pretty about it but its name. It was a country without birds. The mimosa season was over; it was not the region for jasmine. The earth seemed stripped and dry; there were a few cypresses, and hovels roughcast in red ochre. The dead in the little cemetery were doubtless well preserved, so hot was the sun on the hill-side. One wondered where the water came from. Cattle did not roam about the streets, as Sylvaine had hoped; instead, a byre in the neighbourhood poisoned the air far and wide.

The house, found like all the rest by Anny Féret, belonged to a painter who never came there. The bottom of the doors stuck on the tiled floor. The sanitary arrangements were of the most rudimentary. The two women discovered that the boys came and hid behind the juniper hedge at night to watch their Chinese-like shadows dancing across the blinds as they undressed.

"After all, why the hell should we care?" said Sylvaine. "If it amuses them . . ."

She stood in profile, right in the beam of the lamp, and made her breasts jut out.

For the first few days Sylvaine and Fernande amused themselves hugely calling each other by their new names. But the game soon palled.

At first, too, Sylvaine could dazzle Fernande with stories of the theatre, with her dressing-case, accounts of dinners in famous restaurants, her acquaintances and her confident manner of a successful woman of the world. But, later on, the empty evenings engendered confidences, and the two women knew that they were of the same class.

The disagreeable sides of their characters began to show. Sylvaine was autocratic and untidy. Fernande was querulous, peevish and fussy. She was for ever tidying things up.

"It's easy to see that you worked in a cloakroom!" Sylvaine cried. "It's become a mania with you!"

"And anyone can see that you're a tart," replied the other.

"A tart! A tart! You'd better watch what you're saying. Your child didn't happen spontaneously through the Holy Ghost, did it?"

"Well, you should care. It fixes things pretty well for you, I should have thought. Particularly when you're not capable of having one yourself . . ."

Once they even came to blows.

"And me in my condition! You ought to be ashamed of yourself. You're a bitch!" Fernande screamed.

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To Sylvaine chastity was intolerable. For want of other resource, she endeavoured to convert the companion of her exile to Anny Féret's practices. But Fernande did not care for that sort of thing.

"Women disgust me in that way," she declared. "And pretty tastes you've got I must say! Even to think of it with someone who's pregnant!"

"Oh, only your hand, just your hand!" begged Sylvaine.

And she whined for a long time, her head thrown back with its mop of red hair, while Fernande gazed at her contemptuously.

Then, for a day or two, life would run more easily.

The two women had for servant a neighbour, a wrinkled old shrew, who came to do the housework and cooked greasily in oil.

The doctor, who called once a week, was an old gentleman with a grey beard; he smelt of garlic, wore a celluloid collar and a hat pulled down over his eyes. He sounded Fernande and, as he straightened up, said in his strong southern accent: "Everything's going well, quite well, but there's something there I don't understand. Queer, that something!"

He prescribed calcium phosphate. They nicknamed him "Father Something."

By mid-autumn their life had become hell. Sylvaine tyrannized over Fernande as Lulu had tyrannized over her at Deauville.

"Don't go out in the sun . . . Don't eat this; it'll do you harm . . . You drink too much wine . . . You haven't drunk your pint of milk."

In retaliation rather than from necessity, Fernande, as she grew bigger, exploited her condition to overwhelm her companion with demands. She continually expected Sylvaine to fetch her a basin, or put a cold compress on her forehead. The compress damped her curls; Sylvaine must heat a curling-iron to put them in again. Fernande lived in a dressing-gown and demanded orange-flower water a dozen times a day.

The two women continually threatened each other with "packing the whole thing in" and returning to Paris.

"And a hell of a lot of good that would do you!" one of them would shout.

"And you too, wouldn't it?" the other would reply.

They would then fall silent.

"And when I think that this has got to go on till March!" Sylvaine would say, taking her head in her hands.

She had never hated anyone so much as the mother of her future child.

It was during that winter that Sylvaine developed a taste for reading and began to educate herself a little. She read everything that the Grasse library could send her: Maupassant, Xavier de Montepin, Balzac, Marcel Prévost, the first volumes of Proust, and *Jean d'Angrèves*.

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Jean d'Angrèves . . . She dreamed of it for ages: "That's the kind of love I need."

She lacked judgment, but lived intensely in the female characters she read about. In turn she felt herself to be the Duchesse de Maufrigneuse, Colette Baudoche and Odette de Crécy. By her manner as much as by her tone of voice, one could easily have told which book she was in process of reading.

"I don't know how you can fill your head with all that stuff!" Fernande would say. She could happily spend her time counting and counting again the moles that covered her arms and bosom.

Wishing to keep her talent in practice, Sylvaine learnt parts in plays and made Fernande give her the cues. One day she would play the Queen in *Ruy Blas* and would have all Paris at her feet.

"Make me a compress," Fernande would say querulously; "that would be much more to the point."

Sylvaine discovered in *Les Petits Alliés* a verse from Rénier's *Lune Jaune* and for the next week quoted on every possible occasion:

Qui monte mollement entre les peupliers.

"Oh, shut up with your yellow moon!" Fernande said. "How boring you are! Last time it was the bird that fell into the lake; and that was bad enough! But this is intolerable! . . ."

On a sudden Sylvaine was seized with panic. Suppose these months of torture were to serve no purpose in the end, suppose Lulu did not keep his promise? Nothing was impossible when you took his whims into consideration. She at once wrote a long letter to Anny Fêret, who replied: "Don't worry. I'm keeping a good watch on him. He's still in the same frame of mind about you. He's so proud that he gets drunk from happiness every night and tells the story to whoever will listen to him, as if he was about to have the son of Napoleon. I envy you being where you are, when I think how I have to bellow the same old numbers to a crowd of cretins who are not even polite enough to shut up. I think that I shall buy a little house in the country with the fifty thousand francs you're going to give me."

"Poor girl, she's no idea what hell this is," said Sylvaine, throwing the letter onto the dresser.

Fernande got up with the air of a martyr, folded up the letter and went to put it away in a drawer.

III

While Lulu Maublanc, unconscious of the ridiculous figure he cut, retailed the fact of his future paternity to all the old bachelors and café-waiters in Paris, the attention of the women and the younger generation was fixed on Jacqueline Schoudler, his indirect victim.

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Jacqueline, after her bereavement, had achieved a position of unexpected importance in Paris. Without ostentation, indeed with a sincerity that baffled a society which had little time for simple emotion, or any emotion at all if it came to that, she had raised sorrow to a supreme height, to a pinnacle on which it could be admired by all. Hers was "the great sorrow" of the season. She never appeared in public, but there were few parties at which her name was not mentioned.

"How's the poor little Schoudler? . . . Have you any news of her? . . . Poor dear, it's really too terrible!"

"Darling Jacqueline's being hysterically lower-class," said Inès Sandoval, the poetess, who thought she was expected to compete with the Comtesse de Noailles.

Jacqueline had barely escaped a serious nervous breakdown. She had been confined to bed for over two months. To hasten her recovery they had sent her to a nursing-home. She had tottered out of it after four days and fled so as not to lose her reason. Her journey across Paris in a tram had become part of her nightmare.

Since the house in the Avenue de Messine recalled too many happy and horrible memories, Jacqueline went to stay with her mother in the Rue de Lubeck.

Her extreme frailty lent her an intimidating grace. She sat by the fire staring at the flames hour after hour, apparently unaware of what was said to her, while those who battered on the sorrows of others swooped down on her, croaked and flapped their crêpe, taking advantage of her distress, imposing their own on her in pretended consolation.

Widows young and old had found their new queen; to them were joined those stoic mothers who had lost sons in the war. Mauglaives, d'Huisnes, La Monnerie, Dirouville—sixteen branches of the family relieved each other in mounting a lugubrious guard

"You know," said one of these ladies, "after thirty in our family, my dear child, one never buys anything but black dresses."

One day even the old Duchesse de Valleroy arrived in her carriage and pair. She was one of the last people still to own a carriage. Her congenital shyness was expressed in a dryly peremptory manner.

"Offer your sorrow to God, my dear child," she said to Jacqueline. "You'll see; it'll bring you relief."

"Very likely, Aunt," replied Jacqueline wearily.

"And where are your children?"

"With my parents-in law."

"I wish to see them."

She sent her coachman straight off to the Avenue de Messine. Marie-Ange and Jean-Noël, accompanied by Miss Mabel, drove from the Monceau quarter to the Trocadero. Passers-by stopped and turned, wondering who could be travelling in the black carriage with a coat of arms on the doors, and saw two pink startled little faces.

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The drive in Aunt Valleroy's carriage remained in the children's memory as an event.

As she left the Rue de Lubeck, the old Duchesse said to Madame de La Monnerie: "A bad marriage, Juliette, a bad marriage; I warned you!"

Once the visitors had departed, Madame de La Monnerie would summon her daughter to her room for a talk, giving her opinion of each visitor, as she busily kneaded pieces of rye bread. Just now she was engaged in modelling little negroes.

The old lady's deafness was intolerable and compelled Jacqueline to make an effort which, in her weak condition, she found painful.

"You see," said Madame de La Monnerie, "everyone likes you and is interested in you! It's all very well, my child, to be sad but you must really pull yourself together if you're to be tolerable to your friends."

Madame Polant, considering herself promoted to the rank of lady-companion, waged war on the household all day. Jacqueline left her to it. The only distractions she had were letters from her Uncle Urbain, who wrote of his horses, his hunting, his difficulties with his farms, and invariably ended with the words: "I'm an old bear, but I can imagine what life is like for you now; I'd rather say nothing about it."

When winter came, Lartois prescribed a sojourn in a mountain resort for Jacqueline; Isabelle accompanied her cousin.

Isabelle had developed a taste for identifying herself with other people's sorrows.

Her age and physical appearance no longer awakened interest in men much under the age of fifty. Yet the one thing she wanted in the world was to arouse male attention, from whatever quarter, and the first sign of it was apt to turn her head completely. Then, terrified, obsessed by the tragic memories of the past, she would abruptly repulse the potential lover, and cancel the meeting on the very evening when he expected her surrender.

"That young woman doesn't know her own mind," said those who had paid her a little attention.

Her indecision was becoming morbid, extending to everything she did.

Isabelle continually consulted Jacqueline without, it must be said, waiting for an answer.

"What ought I to do? What shall I do? . . . What do you think? What do you think of him?"

Outside the snow lay bright under the night. An orchestra sounded faintly from down below.

Suddenly Jacqueline heard her say: "Of course, you understand, we widows . . ."

"Oh, no, please don't, no comparisons!" cried Jacqueline. "Please, please, don't talk of it!"

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"I'll give you your medicine," Isabelle replied.

Then she went downstairs to dance.

Jacqueline returned from the mountains as pale and thin as ever, and went back to the Avenue de Messine, where she was at least better protected against weeping sympathizers.

Talking to her, one had the impression of addressing someone who was not there; her body continued to function, but only as a clock that has received a sudden blow works till it runs down and then stops for ever.

One day, late in the evening, Madame Polant called on Madame de La Monnerie.

"Madame la Comtesse," she said, "I have a feeling that your daughter needs the consolations of religion."

"Really? You have that impression too, have you, Polant?" replied Madame de La Monnerie. "She no longer goes to Mass, does she?"

"It's not only that, Madame la Comtesse, it's a whole combination of things. She seems to show no interest even in her children any more. She sends for them and then dismisses them at once, as if it did her more harm than good to see them. I've tried to reason with her, but you know what she's like . . ."

The next morning Madame de La Monnerie pinned on her hat and went off to the Dominican Priory in the Faubourg Saint-Honoré to find Father de Granvilage.

The old lady was shown into a small dark parlour. Its walls were whitewashed and it was furnished with three kitchen chairs, a plain deal table and a prie-Dieu with a desk. She waited ten minutes. There was no ornament in the room but a big oaken crucifix. Through the door, whose top half was frosted glass, she could see the silent shadowy figures of the fathers passing to and fro.

"How do you do, Cousin," said the Dominican provincial in a low voice.

He was a tall slender old man with a narrow crown of white hair cut in a fringe across the brow on the level of the first wrinkles. His face was white, the same white as the crown of hair and the long woollen robe; his was the uniform colour of a statue.

Not only was his face scored with the deep furrows of age on the major features, but with an infinite number of tiny criss-cross wrinkles like the skin of hot milk gone cold.

From amid the wrinkles shone fine grey eyes, perceptive, secretive. Somewhere, unfathomably deep, lingered a last glow of goodness.

Reigning with calm authority over the four hundred monks of the thirteen monasteries of the Province of France, over the Scottish Missions, and those of Sweden and Palestine, replying each day in his own hand to some twenty letters, supporting his cheek on arthritically deformed fingers, he had an inexhaustible power of listening.

Madame de La Monnerie talked for a long time.

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"There," she concluded, "that's what comes of marrying a young man of Jewish origins. Elisabeth de Valleroy was saying so only the other day. And look at the result: my daughter has lost her faith and her husband . . ."

The Father Provincial slowly raised his eyes to the ceiling.

"Many good Jews have been converted to our faith," he said. "As for the compulsion that drives one of God's creatures to dispose of his own life, it can arise only from some temporary aberration. Moreover, at the supreme moment, the unhappy man may always have seen the light of conscience and made to God an act of contrition, whose power we cannot know. How can we judge, blind as we are?"

The old lady had to make an effort to hear the Father's low voice. There were Italian inflections in it, acquired during a long residence in Rome.

"Do you think, Cousin," he went on, "that your daughter has lost her faith because of her marriage or because of her husband's death?"

As Madame de La Monnerie did not reply, he went on: "I will do everything in my power, Cousin. I suffer sadly from rheumatism; it is not very easy for me to get about."

And he rose, his knotted fingers clutching the prie-Dieu, with that air of courteous simplicity which elderly princes affect when dismissing ladies from their presence.

Two days later Jacqueline received a letter on the headed paper of the Order. The essential passage in it read as follows:

"It is precisely because God is the Father—and Tertullian has said: *Nemo tam pater*—that His child may always hope for His mercy, can and should always seek perfection. Faith consists precisely in knowing that God is the Father, that God who is so near to us that He became man so that all men, according to the word of St Augustine, may become gods! His nearness is proved by the Incarnation; He is near us again in the Eucharist. Draw near to Him, I counsel you, my dear child, draw near to that infinite source of consolation . . ."

When Madame de La Monnerie had read it, she thought: "Our dear cousin has certainly not put himself to overmuch trouble!"

But a few days later a certain Father Boudret put in an appearance, sent by the Provincial.

IV

There was a moving private ceremony on the occasion of Baron Noël Schoudler's investiture with the insignia of a Commander of the Legion of Honour, which took place at the same time as the presentation of François's Chevalier's Cross.

"Since the son's award is posthumous, there can really be no objection to giving them both together," Anatole Rousseau had declared. "On the contrary!"

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He owed a debt of gratitude to the banker for the satisfactory profits he had made on his block of Sonchelles shares.

The ceremony took place in the offices of the newspaper, late in the afternoon, in the presence of the family and a small number of friends, among whom were Émile Lartois and Albéric Canet, and the higher officials of *L'Echo du Matin* and of the Bank.

Anatole Rousseau was in a witty mood. Standing on the tips of his toes so as to place the wide red ribbon round the giant's neck, he said: "You're too tall, my dear fellow, much too tall. You don't climb to honours; honours rise to you."

Then, amid an emotional silence, a representative of the Minister for War bent down to pin his father's Cross on little Jean-Noël's breast.

The child had instinctively stood to attention. It was the first time he had felt that curious tingling at the back of the neck that is caused at solemn moments by the converging glances of an audience.

On the exact spot where he felt the tingling, a hand was placed. Noël Schoudler put his wide palm behind his grandson's head. Standing thus, his dark eyes gazing thoughtfully downwards, he posed for photographs amid the flashing of magnesium.

There were speeches. Champagne was handed round.

Jacqueline's absence was noticed. But Adrien Leroy's presence was particularly commented on. He was the eldest of the Leroy brothers, and everyone wondered what conclusion to draw from this evidence of a reconciliation between the two rival banks.

Noël held a long conversation with his colleague in a window embrasure.

"Well," said Noël, "and so our dear Maublanc is still making an ass of himself?"

"Alas!" Adrien Leroy replied. "But his greatest folly, the one I can never forgive . . ."

"Don't let's talk any more of that, my dear fellow, don't let's mention it again; it's over and done with. And I particularly want to make it clear to you that I have no grudge against you personally. As far as I am concerned, Maublanc is completely responsible . . . Is it true that Deauville has cost him a lot of money this season?"

Adrien Leroy nodded.

"You hate him, don't you?" he asked.

Noël placed his hand on Leroy's sleeve, saying: "My dear fellow, no one ever injures me with impunity. It'll take time, but I shall kill Maublanc . . . legally."

Simon Lachaume was present with his Minister.

"I'm delighted to see you, Monsieur Lachaume," said the giant. "My son had a great liking for you. He spoke of you in the highest terms."

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"I am greatly touched to hear it, Monsieur," Simon replied. "I liked him very much, and had the greatest admiration for him. His loss is irreparable."

"Irreparable, and I am inconsolable. The days pass and I still feel a great emptiness at my side. But how are things with you? I suppose you're not thinking of doing any journalism these days?"

Anatole Rousseau, who had come up, said, with a friendly gesture: "I hope you're not thinking of leading Lachaume astray?"

"No, no, my dear friend, don't worry, I don't want to take him away from you. And even if I did, I've no doubt he would not wish it. But all the same I wanted to tell him that France is short of young men who can both think and know how to express themselves."

"My dear fellow, that's the whole tragedy of my life!" cried Rousseau, lowering his birdlike lids. "The fact is, one believes one's been given a free hand by the country, but it's not true; it's the country that ties your hands."

"Would you like to see something that's going to make a sensation?" Noël asked. "Come along, then, and you too, Lartois. I've got something to show you in confidence."

He led the three men into a neighbouring office, closed the door, and showed them a table on which were spread the proofs of a dummy of the paper as it would appear in its new format.

"That's how *L'Echo* will look in three days' time," he said.

The others bent over them, studied them and admired. Two large blocks enlivened the first page; the last was made up entirely of news-photographs.

"Ah, very good, very good!" Rousseau said.

"But where do you print your important signed articles?" asked Lartois.

"Here," Noël replied, opening the paper and pointing to the top of the second page.

"Very odd!" said Lartois, a trifle put out.

"No long articles on the first page any more," continued Noël. "It's not a page people read. On the first page the reader should find the dozen odd pieces of essential news, and an announcement of what the rest of the paper contains. It's an advertisement placard."

Simon saw here the realization of every idea that François had mentioned to him in the past. Ingenuously he very nearly said so, but the giant, tapping his forehead with his forefinger, said, leavening his boastfulness a little waggishly: "There's still something inside there, eh, and, you can say what you like!"

Simon lowered his eyes.

"Either you'll capture your rival's circulation," Rousseau said, "or they'll be compelled to spend millions following your lead."

"That's what I'm counting on," replied Noël.

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Simon studied the layout of the well-set-up pages, the way the headlines stood out, the boldness of the contributors' names that were often accompanied by the author's portrait as if to put the public more directly in contact with him.

"It certainly makes one feel one wants to start writing again," said Simon.

Noël placed a heavy hand on the proofs and then this man of sixty-seven, who was his son's heir, with his beard still black, and the big enamel cross swinging from his neck, looked at Simon and said: "Think over what I've said. You see, my dear fellow, we have here the future in our hands!"

As they left the office, he took Simon by the arm and said: "Are you free to lunch or dine one day this week?"

Simon thought of the time when he had brought his first article to *L'Echo*, and wondered whether to think: "What! Two years ago already!" or: "What! Only two years ago?"

A few days later he was having luncheon at the Avenue de Messine. In the small drawing-room, before they went into luncheon, Noël introduced him to Jacqueline, saying: "A great friend of François!"

"Oh yes . . ." she replied.

She was wearing a high-necked black dress with narrow sleeves.

And as Simon—inventing one of those intimate friendships which the dead can no longer contradict—expressed once more his sorrow at François's death, Jacqueline acknowledged it with a nod. Simon found her moving in her thinness; she looked pale, and there was a sort of drowned expression in her eyes.

Suddenly she turned her head away and left the room. Her maid came a few minutes later to announce that "Madame la Baronne François" had a headache and sent her excuses for not being present at luncheon.

Noël and his wife looked sadly at each other, and they went into the dining-room.

The Baronne had thought it necessary to warn Simon: "My husband's father is very, very old . . ."

Nevertheless, the conversation during luncheon took place almost entirely between Simon and the Patriarch. The old man's sympathy was immediately enlisted by someone who knew so well how to listen and show astonishment in the right places.

"Would you like to know, Monsieur, what I said to the Emperor before the expedition to Mexico?" said old Siegfried. "I was a subscriber, though only a modest one, of course . . . humph . . . in the seventy-five millions of the Jecker flotation. And the Emperor . . . humph . . . sent for me to the Tuileries . . . I can see it all as if it were yesterday . . . and I said to him: 'Sire . . .'"

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In telling the stories of his heyday he reverted to the Austrian accent which he had since almost completely lost.

Simon's attention was only in part calculated. He was, of course, well aware that hosts are always grateful to a guest who takes trouble with the Patriarch of the family; but those purple eyelids, drooping over eyes that had gazed on the faces of the masters of a bygone Europe, fascinated him too.

"When my father took me to dine for the first time with Prince Metternich..."

"What? You actually dined with Metternich!" cried Simon.

"Yes indeed, yes indeed. It all seems very long ago... humph... because men nearly always die young. But you'll see: when one reaches my age, one realizes that history is really very short. Two lifetimes such as mine, placed end to end, take you back to the times of Maria Theresa... Afterwards, there was a ball and my father had advised me..."

It was a long time since the Patriarch had been so lively; but it must be admitted that it was also a long time since any stranger had shown so much interest in him.

Noël looked at Simon with a mixture of gratitude and pride; the Baronne, in the presence of this young man the same age as her son, wore an expression of gentle sadness.

"I get up every morning at half-past seven..." said the old man, replying to a question of Simon's. "I take a cup of tea..."

Those rare men who reach or pass their eighth decade become vain of their age. Like boxers, they pursue, in their fight with death, a daily routine of training which they like to recount in terms of what they eat. Baron Siegfried knew that he was a champion in this particular fight; Simon's admiration flattered him.

As they rose from luncheon, he took the young man aside and said: "There comes a time when the death of others almost begins to give one pleasure... I hope you will reach that stage."

He reflected for a moment, then, in what he thought was a low voice, asked: "Do you know how François died? This story of an accident, is it true?"

And he went back to the small drawing-room, quite naturally supporting his disintegrating body on Simon's arm, and saying: "And a little while before Sadowa, I went to Schönbrunn. I knew what France's intentions were and there... humph... I said to the Emperor Franz Josef: 'Sire...'"

The whole of Siegfried's life seemed to have been spent in warning crowned heads of the catastrophes that were about to overtake them.

When the old man put his tongue into his glass to lick up the last of the yellow Chartreuse, Simon did not turn his eyes away, as guests

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usually did out of propriety. On the contrary, he smiled affectionately and comprehendingly.

He had made a conquest of the family.

Siegfried, who never remembered recent events—even François's death had taken more than a month to become fixed in his mind and he was still vague as to exactly when it had happened—asked several times during the following days: "When's that young man coming here again? Am I to see him again?"

Not long after, Simon began writing a weekly column for *L'Echo*. Anatole Rousseau was not best pleased and, one day when Simon had published an article on educational reform, he said, with a severe expression, shaking his long locks: "It's quite clear, my dear Lachaume, that you have things to say, it's your vocation, so be it! But it's as if I, under the pretext of having been called to the bar, wrote an article on the reform of the magistracy. Don't forget that you hold an official position. You must choose between the career of a publicist and that of . . . well, the career you have."

He did not know precisely how to define what that career was.

The following morning Simon had a long conversation with Noël Schoudler. "My dear fellow, with Rousseau, and I know him well," said the giant, "you'll always remain number two, you'll never become number one. He's a man who doesn't like giving people opportunities for their own sakes. Moreover, he won't be a minister for ever. When he no longer has need of you, what will he do for you? And in the first place, what do you want to do yourself? All right, politics, you don't have to tell me that. I know what sort of chap you are: you're like my son; he wanted to stand for Parliament, and he would have succeeded brilliantly, particularly with the means I could have placed at his disposal. Well, it's not Rousseau who'll help you, on the contrary! The Press and business circles can give you far greater support. And besides that, without asking you what you earn at the moment . . ."

Simon felt that the wind was veering and that it was time to change old men. He was beginning to get beyond the age where one still meets with disinterested kindness, and the support of a man as powerful as this one, who had just lost his only son, was not an opportunity to be missed.

That night Noël said to the Patriarch: "Well, Father, you'll be pleased! I'm taking your friend Lachaume on to the *Echo*. To all intents and purposes it's fixed."

V

Lulu Maublanc, alone in his drawing-room, put down the telegram, walked across to the huge gold-framed mirror hanging above the fireplace, and burst out laughing.

The mirror reflected his astonishment, his large yellow teeth wholly uncovered.

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"Twins! Twins!" he said aloud. "Ah, bravo, old man, bravo! My God, this'll stagger them! Twins!"

He stood there admiring himself for several minutes, smoothing the white down on his temples, tapping his waistcoat, laughing into the mirror as if he needed to duplicate himself so as to celebrate this double birth.

Then he had his coat brought, perched a brown bowler on his head and went out, swinging his stick by the ferule.

"This girl has given me the greatest happiness of my life!" he thought, treading on air. "Really, most satisfactory; success on the stage, discretion . . . twins! I'd give a hundred louis to see Schoudler's face. Oh, it won't be long before he hears of it . . . But where the devil am I making for?"

He hailed the first taxi that came along.

"The Excelsior Club, Boulevard Haussmann," he cried.

Going from room to room he announced the great news to every friend he could find.

"You old dog!" they cried, slapping him on the back.

That evening, as soon as it was open, he went to the Carnaval to tell Anny Féret the news. The latter played her part well.

"I'm not at all surprised," she said; "Sylvaine wrote to me that she was as round as a tower. Poor child, two at once! Well, Lulu darling, you certainly do go it!"

"It was the day I was so drunk, you know," he replied, as if excusing himself.

And for the next few days he went about saying to everyone, "I'll give you twenty to one you don't know what's happened to me . . ."

And he laughed even more loudly than they did.

Princess Tozzi made a pun: "*The jumeaux-blancs*," and Lartois hawked it about to the amusement of Paris.

The only people who took the affair less amusedly were the Leroys, when Lulu opened an account at their bank in the name of Mademoiselle Dual for a million.

"My dear Lucien," said Adrien Leroy (he was only sixteen months younger than his uncle and their relationship was more like that of cousins), "I must tell you that your fortune is not inexhaustible. Don't forget that your unsuccessful operations against Schoudler, in which you were kind enough to involve us, have made a serious hole in your capital. You know how much you drew last year, particularly during your stay at Deauville, and how much you've drawn since the beginning of this. Don't have too many children, my dear chap, not too many! I don't have to tell you that you've many enemies on Change, and if one day you find yourself in difficulties . . ."

"What difficulties? What enemies?" cried Maublanc. "Schoudler? To hell with him!"

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And then he went on bantering: "But really, my dear Adrien, is it because you are so certain of surviving me that you take such an anxious interest in my affairs?"

A fortnight later, carrying a bunch of roses, he went to the Gare de Lyon to meet Sylvaine.

She got out on the platform, followed by the "friend" who was carrying the infants in her arms.

Sylvaine looked splendidly well.

"I recovered very quickly," she said.

"And there they are, the darlings!" cried Lulu, stroking the twins' cheeks with bent forefinger. "What? There's a boy and a girl? I hadn't realized that; I thought it was two boys."

"Not at all! I told you in my first letter: the girl is called Lucienne, after you, and the boy Fernand, because Fernande is his godmother. Don't you read my letters?"

"Of course I do, darling, what do you think! But as you always spoke of them in the plural as twins, I've always imagined since your first telegram that they were boys. As for you, Mademoiselle," Lulu added, speaking to the "friend," "I don't think you're looking so well as when you left."

Fernande, unhappy, a lump in her throat, clasping to her the two little bodies that in a few minutes would be taken from her for ever, held back her tears and forced a smile.

"Oh, but she was wonderful, you know!" Sylvaine said quickly. "She got so exhausted looking after me!"

They walked through the station, Sylvaine on Lulu's arm, and Fernande following behind. They looked rather like a baptismal procession. In the taxi Lulu asked: "You don't feed them yourself, do you?"

"Oh, no! I hadn't enough milk," Sylvaine replied.

On the doorstep of the Rue de Naples Sylvaine embraced Fernande four times over, took the children from her and said: "Thank you, dearest, for everything you've done! You've been an angel. I really don't know what I should have done without you. We'll telephone each other tomorrow morning for sure."

The little nursemaid whom Sylvaine had asked Anny Féret to engage to take charge of the children had already arrived. During the morning the Trois Quartiers had sent in two cradles, one pink and the other blue.

Sylvaine was busy for an hour arranging things for the twins, giving instructions to the new nurse, and establishing feeding-hours, while the housemaid, who did not know whether she should call the mistress "Mademoiselle" or "Madame," was unpacking the trunks.

Amid all the bustle Lulu stood smiling, allowing himself to be pushed here and there, stroking his neck above his collar.

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When at last everything had been more or less organized, Sylvaine sat down and said to the maid: "Is there any whisky in the house? There is? Well, bring some."

She poured some out for Lulu and herself, and said, raising her glass: "My first in six months. And, goodness me, Lulu my dear, it tastes good! You must believe me when I tell you that it hasn't been an altogether easy time."

"Did you suffer much?" he asked.

"What do you think! It seems that my cries were heard by the whole village. They used to gather outside the house every four hours."

"My darling child," said Lulu, unable to stop smiling.

Then, taking a long envelope from his pocket, he added: "And here is my promise!"

"You know, I jolly well earned it," said Sylvaine, smiling too.

She took the envelope, opened it, looked at the Leroy Bank's letter and the beautiful new cheque-book in a leather folder. Her smile disappeared.

"What? Do you mean to say there's only one?" she asked.

"One what?"

"One million."

"Yes, of course," said Lulu.

"But, darling Lulu, you simply haven't understood our bargain," Sylvaine cried. "You said to me: one million if I gave you a child. I've given you two: what about that?"

Lulu began to frown, shake his head, and puff angrily at his cigarette.

"Unless, of course, you're prepared to recognize them?" she went on. "Of course, if you're prepared to do that, it's a different matter."

"No, no, at least not at once. I really can't embroil myself with my whole family. But I'm thinking of it, seriously contemplating it. It's a thing I intend doing one day, but all in good time . . ."

"That's all nonsense," said Sylvaine angrily, pacing up and down the room. "If you won't recognize them, it's one million per child. I won't budge from that. We can't tell what may happen to any of us. I want to ensure the future. Otherwise I'll simply hand them over to you and you can do the best you can. You don't know what bringing up a couple of children's like! I had them only to please you . . ."

At last he allowed himself to be persuaded. He thought: "After all, what possible difference can it make to me! I've spent enough money in the past and got nothing for it. The children at least exist. I'm going to bring off a coup in cotton; I'll make it all up."

Nevertheless, he felt he ought to say: "But after this, my darling girl, you really must stop looking on Lulu as a milch-cow for some considerable time."

"But, darling, I'll never ask you for anything again."

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"Very well then, that's all right."

And he sent an order for another million to Leroy.

To meet it Adrien had to sell some more of Lulu's holdings.

Anny Féret, who was always wise about other people's affairs, advised Sylvaine to change her banking account.

"It would be much better if it were not known what you do with your money. What's more, in your place I'd put it into three-per-cents; they're the only safe investment."

But when Sylvaine, honest in her prosperity, gave her a hundred thousand francs, she at once took a hideous flat in the Rue de la Pompe, decorated it with dark red walls, white satin furniture, and her own photograph in theatrical costume on every available flat surface.

As for the little country cottage she had dreamed of, that was relegated to the future.

Fernande also received a hundred thousand francs. She acquired a partnership in a draper's in Montmartre; the business was not as good as it had been made out to be. She spent her whole day in the shop watching people go by whom she had never seen before, though she had worked five years in the district.

Two kinds of people lived in Montmartre; and they had nothing to do with each other. Those who lived by day, half city-dwellers, half provincials, *concierges* at the doors of blocks of flats, ragged-headed housewives haggling over a few centimes for skeins of wool. Fernande soon regretted the other kind, those who lived by electric light, looked as if they enjoyed life, and disappeared with the dawn, leaving ten francs as a tip for a packet of cigarettes.

Her natural inclination towards self-pity was accentuated. Forgetting that, a few months earlier, she had been terrified of losing her job, had seen herself condemned to eternal poverty, and would have been prepared to do anything to put a term to her pregnancy, she now saw her unhappiness as due to the fact that she had renounced her children. Counting her moles, she reasoned most illogically. "The fact is," she thought, "with those hundred thousand francs I could have brought them up myself." And tears came to her eyes as she arranged a layette for display in the window.

In the early days she often went in the evening to the Rue de Naples to give the twins a kiss. Sylvaine was far from hospitable, and kept on saying: "Sssh! Sssh!" and: "Hurry up!"

"After all, I'm their godmother," Fernande complained.

Even this bitter consolation was soon denied her.

Sylvaine wanted to live, to have a good time, to make up for the time lost in her southern exile.

She considered she was rich for life, or for fifteen years at least. For in fifteen years' time she would have become a great actress, would have made a rich marriage, or in any case be old, perhaps even dead.

Had she been penniless, it would probably have taken her six months to get a contract. But with her present elegance, the freedom of action permitted by her balance at the bank, the ability to say: "Come round and have a drink about six o'clock; we'll discuss it then," she got an immediate engagement for a play being put on at the Variétés. Her little success of the previous year had not been forgotten.

"You made a splendid beginning," people told her. "Where have you been hiding yourself?"

The twins were a bore. The flat was too small for two cradles and two servants. Sylvaine found a woman near Malmaison to take the infants. She thought she had amply fulfilled her duty towards the two uninteresting little creatures. "Thanks to me," she thought, "they will be brought up as they would never have been by their mother." She very nearly persuaded herself that the whole business had been highly moral, and that she had played a very proper part in the affair. With the fortune of a rich old man she had been able to benefit several people who badly needed it. Wasn't this the way things should be?

It was also quite natural that she should begin to wonder how she could push Lulu out of her life.

VI

"More sugar, Father?" said Jacqueline with the ghost of a smile on her thin, pale lips.

"Thank you, Madame, I have enough," replied Father Boudret.

He turned the little cup sideways to show the four lumps he had already placed in it.

"That's not at all saintly, Father!" said Jacqueline.

"But I'm not a saint, Madame, far from it! I might perhaps have approached sanctity had I remained as I was at twenty or, rather, had I improved myself since then. But it seems to me, you know, that most men spend their lives falling short of the hopes and dreams they had when they were twenty. I'm not conceited enough to believe myself an exception to the general rule."

As if he feared he was taking himself too seriously, he added laughing: "You see, I'm over-fond of sugar."

The Dominican Father, sent by Father de Granvilage, who had now been visiting Jacqueline for eight weeks, was a somewhat curious personality.

He was a heavily built man in his sixties, with a protruding belly beneath his white robe. He never lolled in armchairs, but sat bolt upright. He was quite bald and almost without eyebrows or eyelashes; his heavy face had vast flat cheeks and a strong chin hidden among the fleshy folds of his neck; his head was round and polished and seemed solidly carved from a block of wood.

He was of peasant birth and took no pains to hide it.

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"I am often asked," he said, "whether I am related to the Marquis de Boudret. But indeed I am not! I have no such aristocratic origins. I am but a poor Boudret whose six brothers cultivate the land in Artois, and who has desired to do the Lord's work."

There was none of the languid piety, the upper-class religiosity, of the Father Provincial about him.

Father Boudret's dignity was of a different kind, though just as real.

The previous year he had preached the Lenten sermons at the Madeleine; this year he was to preach at Notre-Dame. He was on the road to celebrity in the religious world.

No task could impair his prodigious physical and moral strength: whether it was preaching to crowds, managing a college, or converting a single soul, he devoted himself to his task with the same singleness of purpose, because everything in the world seemed to him of equal importance.

When he had come to the Avenue de Messine for the first time, and had been shown into Jacqueline's boudoir on the first floor, he had realized at first sight of the young woman that his task would be hard.

For, when he told Jacqueline the precise object of his visit, he saw neither hostility nor defiance in her eyes, only a sort of resigned contempt which seemed to him to signify: "All right, Father, go on, do your duty!" as if he were a doctor preparing some useless injection.

So Father Boudret had begun by spending ten minutes examining her treasures.

"What's this?" he asked. "And this? Oh, that's very pretty indeed!"

He seemed to take particular delight in books with heraldic bindings. He asked her leisurely questions, expressed his pleasure knowledgeably; it seemed that he was erudite in many fields and was unceasingly seeking opportunities to increase his knowledge.

"The life of the Maréchal de Tavannes. He was one of your ancestors, was he? Yes, yes, of course the battle of Montcontour . . ."

His attitude somewhat disconcerted Jacqueline. His mere presence, large and white-robed, seemed to alter the dimensions of the little boudoir. It was as if Rodin's Balzac had been brought into the room.

The Dominican suddenly picked up from a table a rather yellowed photograph of a young officer of Dragoons in 1914 uniform. Slipped into the corner of the frame was another smaller photograph. They were the same photographs that Jacqueline had had on her bedside table at the birth of Jean-Noël. He gazed at them for a long time.

"This is your husband, isn't it? A fine, loyal face. I think I'm going to like him very much, Madame," he said.

He said this as if speaking of someone he would be meeting the following day, in whose company he expected to live for a long time.

Then he turned towards Jacqueline and looked at her.

As in the eyes of Father de Granvilage, but even more distinctly,

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there were three different planes in depth in Father Boudret's: in the first place, ceaseless, untiring attention; behind it a zone of secrets, the secrets of the heart—deliberate renunciations, weaknesses overcome, sins heard—the long-drawn strategy of laying siege to souls; and behind that again infinite goodness, a desire for permanent, universal comprehension.

Because of the photograph, and because of his gaze, Jacqueline began to weep.

"Don't apologize, Madame! You need not be ashamed of your sorrow," the Dominican said. "All love that passes beyond the human plane is a path to God."

And then he left, saying as he received his cloak from the footman: "Thank you, brother."

He had returned two days later, and then two days after that, and joined battle.

Confession of sin is easier than confession of anguish.

By day and night Jacqueline's dreams were nothing but a long physical and mental agony.

"If there is a God above, François is damned. But it's not true, there is no God, there is no other world, only space and darkness. If God existed, he would not have allowed it to happen. There is only a black void and I shall never see him again. I'm dead, I'm dead and don't know it, and I'm searching for François in darkness and cannot find him! I would rather live with the agony of his memory than run the risk of finding myself face to face with oblivion all alone. I'm a coward, I'm afraid to die. He's calling me and I pretend not to hear him because I lack the courage to kill myself . . ."

These moods ended in physical weakness, fainting-fits, outbursts of weeping, sudden awakenings with weakened pulse and icy limbs, a dark sooty cloud before the eyes, a sensation of the world's unreality and of her own disordered perceptions.

The components of her obsession seemed to increase with time, and to manifest every possible convolution of the mind. She felt as if her brain were caught in the meshes of a net she could not evade.

From moment to moment she awaited François's summons, but the summons never came. Not only did she deny God, but it seemed as if she had a grudge against him for not existing.

Her mind seemed to be sliding more surely towards madness than suicide.

Visit by visit, Father Boudret worked patiently to disentangle the psychological mesh in which she was bound and bring her to a realization of that vaster network, the omnipotence of God.

His task was difficult. The death of someone one loves, cut down in the midst of life, is a terrible weapon against faith, constituting in itself an almost irrefutable denial.

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Jacqueline, crouched in the corner of a Directoire settee, her fragile hands, on which her wedding-ring had now become too large and loose for its finger, crossed over her thin knees, soon recognized that the Father's presence did her good.

The sense of vital warmth, the very living solidity the Dominican exuded, were salutary. Moreover, in the depths of his eyes there was a light of charity that made her long to trust him, to allow herself to be guided.

In her weak, distraught condition it was difficult for Jacqueline not to yield little by little to such overwhelming strength, not to allow herself to be subjugated by it. Sick as she was, there was but one straw she could clutch at amid the waters of oblivion: his long white robe.

Father Boudret had only to make a gesture with his wide sleeves, and the great multitude of the faithful peopled the room, bearing witness; alternatively, he could evoke fifteen generations of Jacqueline's ancestors, all of whom had been faithful to the Church and its dogma; above all, he reconstructed the universe day by day in such fashion that the dead François lived, bound to the living Jacqueline by mysterious links.

He had been working on her for two months and he felt that victory was near. There was one last fortress to reduce, and then Jacqueline, sorrowing but delivered, would bow before the omnipotence of the Creator and find her way back to life.

Father Boudret, having drunk his tea sugared to the consistency of syrup, put down his cup and listened to Jacqueline.

"No, Father," she said, "I must explain that though I am much less intelligent and knowledgeable than you, though I admire you and envy your faith, eternal life is to me but a dream for the healthy. By some absurd, ridiculous chance we are born, and by it we die; there is only darkness before and after . . ."

"And are the stars dark, and is love?" the Father interrupted. "And is God an invention to relieve the agony of the living, just a brake on their worst propensities?"

He smiled gravely. Jacqueline made no reply.

"Do you realize, Madame," he went on, "that great physicists are less and less convinced of the absurd and ridiculous chance, as you call it. Every day science traces such chances to their source, whittles them away, proves that they are but a name for our own myopia. Those same laws which are being discovered nowadays concerning the movements of heavenly bodies and of atomic structures, are enough to compel my belief in God. Hazard or chance, in the sense of a gratuitous margin of cosmic freedom between stable elements, does not exist. Otherwise, one must hold the universe to be but an expression of absolute incoherence with no exception, innate incoherence, reasonless,

objectless, more blind and more absurd than the blind fate of antiquity, incoherence for the sake of incoherence, applied to each and every manifestation, heavenly bodies, the earth itself, vegetation, the soul. There is one alternative: to believe!"

Jacqueline shook her head.

"Absolute incoherence, Father," she murmured.

"Was your love for François part of this universal absurdity? When you became aware of each other, knew that you loved each other, did you not feel that you were destined for each other?"

The Father called Jacqueline "Madame," but referred to the dead man by his Christian name; he seemed to have acquired, by means of his daily prayers, an intimacy with François that astonished Jacqueline.

She passed her hand slowly across her eyes.

"If there is one love in the world that cannot be held to be absurd, then nothing else can be so!" said Father Boudret, rising.

He went to the window, and opened it. The early spring evening lay over the garden, its box borders, its newly planted flower-beds. The evening was mild. Before darkness set in, lights were beginning to glow from the windows; a wide, low murmur rose from the city.

"Does all this give you a mere feeling of incoherence?" asked the Father, as he gently propelled Jacqueline towards the window. "As for myself, Madame, in spite of the suffering sustained by my human brothers, I love the life that the good Lord has created. The sense of its incoherence begins, and I know it well, in the face of death. It is precisely to overcome it that God has given us faith."

As Jacqueline shivered, her eyes unseeing, lost in contemplation as she endeavoured to reconcile her own sorrow with the world, Father Boudret closed the window, returned to the middle of the room and said: "Beyond Reason there is Revelation. It is not only we who affirm this; the Hindus know it too. We say: Faith is the miraculous instrument which God has placed at the disposition of His creatures to raise their vision, their understanding, and their sorrows to a higher plane. All great theological systems are similar in this. Every human being who has perfect Faith is perfect; can indeed only become perfect through Faith."

Jacqueline turned her eyes to Father Boudret.

"It may well be that you are right, Father," she said. "You must be right."

At this moment the door opened, and a high voice cried, "Mama!"

And Marie-Ange halted in confusion at the sight of the Dominican.

"Come in, darling, come and say how-do-you-do to the kind Father," Jacqueline said.

Father Boudret sat down so as to be at the same height as the child; he took her on his knee.

Jean-Noël and Marie-Ange in general showed a certain revulsion to

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the kisses that were lavished on them by the more elderly members of the family. But with Father Boudret it was a different matter. Their little lips were instinctively held out towards the heavy, majestic face rising from the collar of the monk's hood.

Marie-Ange was well, but a little thin perhaps. She had grown a lot during the last month. She was already in her first year of religious instruction.

"Well, my dear child, what have you learnt this week?" Father Boudret asked.

"The Creed, Father," Marie-Ange replied.

"Really? That's splendid. And you understood it? You can remember it, can't you?"

"Oh yes, Father!"

"Well then, let's hear it."

Jacqueline smiled. "Marie-Ange will remember all her life," she thought, "that it was a great religious teacher who made her recite the Creed. The Father knows what he is doing; these are the things which make their mark."

The light, rapid, sing-song voice of the child recited the words.

"Don't go so fast, don't go so fast!" said Father Boudret. "I couldn't say my Creed as fast as that! I wouldn't have time to think of the meaning of the words."

The phrases learnt in childhood, and repeated so often, reeled off automatically in Jacqueline's mind, running ahead of the child's recital: "The forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting . . ."

"The resurrection of the body . . ." Marie-Ange recited.

"The resurrection of the body," the Father repeated gravely, raising his hand. "And on that day," he went on (his voice, rather hoarse, was a little unsteady because he was clothing his words with such profound conviction), "every soul will be present in all its completeness, that is to say fused with every instant of its past, with every act it has committed, all that it has done of good or evil from birth to death and beyond death, and with what other souls have done for it . . ." He knew that his words were beyond the comprehension of the child but he did not worry about confusing her. But in Jacqueline's mind, between two phrases of a prayer, a huge, sudden spark glowed as if it came from between the two carbons of an arc-lamp.

"And the souls will appear," the Dominican went on, "for judgment, for judgment before the aggregate of all souls fused in the judgment of the Creator their Father, and they will take their place, *one beside another*, in the harmony foreseen by infinite goodness."

Jacqueline would have been incapable of repeating Father Boudret's words. Indeed, words no longer counted. She understood the Father on a plane that had nothing to do with words; hers was a direct.

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adherence, a fusion of thought with thought, of which the verbal expression was but the less. Jacqueline's thought glowed, as she had sometimes known it to do when she was with François in the early days of their love; the glow seemed to illuminate the universe, both this life and the life beyond.

François was present, as much present as Marie-Ange; and there seemed to be another presence behind the Dominican, for whom he was no more than an interceder.

Jacqueline heard the Father say: "That's very good, my dear child. Now you can go and play."

A second later the world had become itself again, but Jacqueline had been converted.

When the child had left, the young woman said simply: "Thank you, Father."

"No, Madame! Say: 'Thank you, Lord . . .'" said Father Boudret, rising, and he made the sign of the Cross on Jacqueline's brow so delicately that she was scarcely aware of it.

He went down to the hall, put on his hat and cape and returned to his monastery.

From that day Jacqueline endeavoured to believe with as much determination as she had previously put into the will to die, yet feeling nevertheless separated from perfect faith by that same thin, impalpable veil which had, in her moments of greatest despair, kept her this side of death.

Every Sunday she took Marie-Ange and Jean-Noël to the Dominicans' Mass. The *Imitation of Christ* was her bedside book.

She was, also, to be seen on spring afternoons walking in the Bois with her children. She had partly regained her complexion, and seemed to take some interest in conversation. One day her surprised family heard her laugh.

VII

Everything Noël Schoudler had in the past refused his son concerning *L'Echo du Matin*, he allowed Simon Lachaume to organize within the next few months.

Simon had joined the paper without any precisely defined position. Noël Schoudler had merely said: "Monsieur Lachaume will work with me."

And he had given him double the salary that he was receiving from Rousseau. His importance was gauged from the size of his salary. Very soon it became even greater than had at first been supposed.

By transforming the *Echo* Noël had completely achieved his objective. He had raised the circulation and given the whole press a new direction. Only *Le Temps* and the *Débats* had remained faithful to their old tradition and were read by a small, but stable, public.

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But when Noël had exhausted his son's ideas, he was brought up short. In these circumstances his mind, trained in the habits of a previous generation, was of little use in maintaining what he himself had undertaken.

Owing to Simon's deference towards men older than himself, his cleverness in dealing with them, his air of having always something to learn from them, and thanks also to the admirable intellectual machine housed within his skull, he gave Noël Schoudler, day by day, and without offence, all that he required.

François's had been a creative spirit; Simon's was that of a disciple. Through these two young men, one dead and one living, Noël reigned over a whole section of the press that was now become more powerful than ever.

By his side, and on his behalf, Simon superintended and controlled, sifted suggested ideas, arbitrated in disputes. The experience and authority that he had acquired from his duties in the Ministry were most useful to him.

And people were beginning to say, as they did when he was still with Rousseau: "When you want to get something out of the boss, you'd better go and ask Lachaume."

Sometimes Noël thought: "Oh, if only François had been like him!"

In his position of semi-dictatorship Simon could savour the power of the press as it was at that time, when one article could determine a celebrity or smash the career of a new play, and when a well-managed campaign could make a government fall. People still attached great importance to the written word; men of letters, successful actors, parliamentarians, invited Simon to their parties, their first nights, or sent him their books with flattering inscriptions. Simon felt much more powerful now than he had as deputy-chief of a government office, with no authority except over civil servants. Now it was he to whom chiefs of staff and even ministers themselves telephoned. He could get out of them what he wanted, and guessed that his Legion of Honour was not far away.

His office was next door to Noël's. Often, towards the end of the day, the giant would come into Simon's room and discuss matters that had nothing whatever to do with the paper; he felt the need to relax, which was something new to him and showed that he was a little exhausted by life.

Simon retailed to him the gossip of the town, and excelled in re-awakening in the tired man a glow of indignation. Simon's presence renewed Noël's youth, and sometimes moved him to think: "François ought to be in this office."

It was Simon who first told him of the birth of the twins.

"And he's been foolish and vain enough to believe it!" said Noël.

Whenever Maublanc was mentioned in his presence, his dark eyes

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narrowed. In a blue folder—one that had belonged to François—which he kept carefully under lock and key, he would from time to time place a little dated memorandum in which was recorded everything he heard about his enemy.

It was also Simon who told him the story of the two millions.

"Anyway the girl must be damned clever," said Noël. "Did you say you knew her?"

"I've only seen her once, you know," replied Simon "the night of Lartois's party, when she made Maublanc sign his promise. But I must admit I really don't know whether I should even recognize her. I know she had red hair . . ."

"Yes, indeed, Lartois did tell me something of the story. But it happened at such a tragic moment for me . . . Dual, you say her name is, Dual . . . And she made him sign . . . I can well understand," Noël went on, "why the Leroy's hinted to me that they no longer consider themselves as standing four square with their uncle. The fact is that the twins now represent a serious threat to the estate, and if Maublanc should take it into his head . . ."

He left his phrase hanging in suspense and closed his eyes.

" . . . for all the heirs," he murmured.

And suddenly, leaning with both hands on the arms of his chair, he brought his huge body upright.

"I've got it!" he cried. "Yes, I think I've got it. If what I have in mind is possible, then there's no more Maublanc. I'll crush him, I'll strangle him. Click! Like that! Why the devil didn't I think of it before? Thank you for having told me the story, Simon, thank you. I think you've just done me a very great service. The whole conception depends now on finding out whether legally . . ."

He was in a state of exaltation such as Simon had never seen him in before. He seized the telephone.

"Give me Maître Rosenberg," he said to the girl on the switchboard.

And a few seconds later: "Hullo, this is Baron Schoudler. Oh, it's you, my dear friend. When can I come and see you? Yes, today; most urgently. In half an hour; good, I'll be there."

He hung up, took Simon by the shoulders with such force that the latter thought: "By Jove! He may be old, but I'm damned if I'd like to fight him."

"Well, my boy," said Noël, "it'll be almost too good to be true!"

During the whole journey to his lawyer's office, which was on the other bank of the river, Noël tapped the carpet on the floor of his motor-car with his foot. "Ah," he thought, "what an admirable present to give François on the anniversary of his death."

Jean Rosenberg was an elegant Jew, dark of complexion and silver-haired, who squinted a little, and loved old furniture and rare books. A great commercial lawyer, permanent adviser to many big firms,

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among which were the Schoudler bank, the *Echo*, and the Lieufort steelworks, he always avoided going to law and had made a speciality of compromise and arbitration. When listening to his clients he had a peculiar gesture of his own which consisted in placing his thumbs on his lips and interlacing his other fingers so as to make a sort of *cheval-de-frise* in front of his face.

"Well, what has brought you here, my dear fellow?" he asked.

Schoudler was breathing heavily. He was suddenly assailed by a feeling of apprehension. Would the magnificent plan he had conceived be wiped out by the lawyer's answer?

"Can a guardian," he said at last, "acting as such, demand a legal trustee to deal with the affairs of a relation of his ward?"

"Ah, that's a question in civil law. I imagine this concerns you in your capacity as guardian to your grandchildren?"

"Yes," said Schoudler.

"Well, let's get this quite clear," the lawyer went on, crossing and recrossing his fingers. "You want to know whether you, as guardian, can demand the appointment of a legal trustee . . . On the face of it, yes! Let's see: a legal trustee is to all intents and purposes an interdiction on a person managing his own affairs, and the guardian is normally competent . . . But let's make sure . . ."

The lawyer turned, searched among his collection of Dalloz law books that filled one of the lower shelves of the bookcase behind him, selected a volume and rapidly turned the pages.

"Here it is," he said. "Legal trustee . . . Interdict . . . This is it."

He took a magnifying glass and focussing it read: "An interdiction can be applied for in the name of a relation who is a minor by his legal representative. There has even been," he added, "a judgment to this effect given in the Douai Court of Appeal in 1848. Moreover, I see here that the nomination of a trustee can be demanded by everyone who has the right to apply for an interdiction. In those circumstances you can most certainly do it. There is no legal objection, my dear friend."

Schoudler rose from his chair and rubbed his thick hands together.

"That's good news, Rosenberg," he said. "And what are the exact grounds to put forward?"

"Oh, the grounds vary. In general it's extravagance. You've obviously got to do with a spendthrift, haven't you? Yes. But take care. I remember having a matter involving a legal trustee to deal with a few years ago. You must be able to prove that the spendthrift, by his wastefulness, is placing his whole fortune in danger."

"That's to say that a man who speculates on the Bourse like a madman . . ."

"Oh, no, that won't do," the lawyer cried. "Don't put that in evidence; you'd be non-suited. Losses due to speculation on the Bourse

are looked on as unfortunate financial operations, but not as squandering within the meaning of the term."

"That's a pity," said Schoudler. "What about cards, women? A man who gives millions away to little tarts, who loses his shirt in the club every damned night?"

"Oh, that's splendid, if you've got proof of it. The squandering of the fortune must be due to whim or passion. On that count you'll be on very firm ground . . . And now," said the lawyer, once again forming his fingers into a *cheval-de-frise*, "do you want to proceed with a petition to the Court of First Instance? Because that's where all this is leading. Isn't there some means by which, having threatened him with a legal trustee, you could arrive at some compromise happier for all parties? An outright gift for instance between the parties, with the guarantee of a life-annuity to the spendthrift which would practically give him the usufruct? It might be a way of settling things."

"But I don't want to settle them!" cried Noël.

Rosenberg smiled.

"Very well," he said. "You will have then, in the first place, to call a family council. I don't need to tell you that a family council, particularly in a case of this kind, must work out the preliminaries. With you I've no doubt that the work will be well done. Keep me informed and come and see me again when you have decided to take proceedings, if you're really determined to do so."

Then, as he showed Noël out, he said, taking an old book from the table: "One of my clients brought me this recently: a first edition of *Voiture*. I'm delighted with it."

On his return from seeing Rosenberg, Noël murmured to himself: "We mustn't take the bit between our teeth; at all costs we must take care not to do that."

Next morning he had an hour's conversation with Adrien Leroy. When the two bankers parted, they shook hands in the friendliest way.

"You have my entire agreement and I guarantee my brother's," said Adrien Leroy. "We are grateful to you for taking these most disagreeable proceedings on your own shoulders, but you have convinced me that they are inevitable. Let me know the results of the preliminary enquiry. I shall hope to see you again soon."

Throughout the following week Noël was very busy making preparations for the family council. In every conversation the names of Jean-Noël and Marie-Ange cropped up constantly, and his concern to protect the two children's future. Ultimately, when he had interviewed the whole family, Noël made an appointment with Anatole Rousseau.

"I have not come to see the Minister, nor even the friend, but the lawyer," said the giant as he entered the room.

Rousseau raised his little square hand.

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"Oh, my poor friend," he cried, "you know it's a very long time since I have acted as counsel . . ."

"That's of no importance. I have complete confidence in you, and I have great faith in your advice."

"You're doing me too much honour, my dear friend. Very well, let's hear what you've got to say," said Rousseau throwing back his lock of hair.

Noël began explaining the circumstances.

"Take care, take care," Rousseau interrupted. "Has a guardian, acting as such, the right to introduce such a demand? Have you taken advice on that point?"

"Yes," Schoudler replied. "The circumstances are exactly similar to a petition for an interdiction . . ."

"Oh, very well, that's all right then. Go on."

The whole conversation was on these lines. It was Rousseau who, out of his somewhat distant legal memories, raised here and there objections, while Schoudler gave him the facts, repeating word for word what Rosenberg had extracted from Dalloz.

"Well, my dear fellow," Rousseau concluded, "you seem to me to have been very well advised, extremely well counselled. I can't see anything to prejudice your case in all this."

"Good, that's very reassuring! I must congratulate myself in having come to see you," said Noël, as if Rousseau had really been able to give him valuable advice. "I must repeat that I have, of course, not come to talk to you as a friend, but as a lawyer. As for your fee . . ."

"My dear fellow, I wouldn't dream of it," Rousseau said.

"But, of course, my dear fellow, I absolutely insist. I shall doubtless have to bother you again when the case comes to court. The bank will hold twenty thousand francs at your disposal and you can draw on them as and when you like."

At that point the Minister understood much more clearly how his services could be useful to Schoudler.

"You're too kind," he said. "You'll keep me in touch with the case, won't you, and since it would appear that very considerable interests will be involved, and perhaps not financial interests alone, warn me before it goes to court and let me know the judge's name. I'll telephone him. I think you'll find that it'll all turn out all right . . . What of our friend Lachaume," he added, with a change of tone which signified that the matter was agreed; "how is he?"

"He's very well. And he's being brilliantly successful."

"I was sure of it. You know I did my best to encourage him to work for you. I felt that it was essential to his career. But of course it was I who trained him, and trained him well, I must say. He was very attached to me."

"He still is," said Noël.

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"I've no doubt of it," said Rousseau. "Oh, by the way, though I'm sure you don't personally concern yourself with such minor details, though he must do so: you've got a caricaturist on the *Echo* who really is a bit hard on me. I know that I'm not very tall, but really to depict me as a basset-hound is going rather too far!"

On his return to the newspaper offices Noël went to Simon's room and seized him by the hands. The giant's smile was like a young man's.

"My dear Simon," he cried, "I've got all my big guns lined up. And now it's a question of 'Ready to fire. Fire!' And that's the end of Maublanc . . . And while I think of it, have the caricatures of Rousseau made to look a bit taller. Have him represented as—I don't really know—as a whipper perhaps!"

VIII

The woman with whom the twins had been farmed out was a specialist in bringing up the illegitimate products of the upper classes. Sylvaine had chosen her on admirable references and had not haggled over the price of their keep. Nevertheless the change of régime had affected one of the infants, the boy, who mysteriously pined and, after a month, died.

When Sylvaine heard the news, she was already late for her afternoon rehearsal, the first rehearsal on the stage, and her new lover, a tall dark boy who was acting in the same play, was impatiently awaiting her.

She scribbled a note to Lulu.

"It often happens with twins," she explained. And then went on, "I am shattered. I no longer know what I'm doing. I don't even know what I'm saying. I'm going off to work like an automaton."

And she thought: "And he'll think it necessary to come round and console me this evening! What a bore!"

She had so managed things as not to see him for forty-eight hours. She added to her note: "We shall be rehearsing all evening and all night. It's appalling!"

"Yes, yes, I'm ready, darling, here I am," she cried to the dark boy.

The latter, seeing her looking worried, asked: "Is something the matter?"

"Oh, nothing; just the usual worries."

She thought: "Fernande must be told! That'll be quite another story."

On leaving the theatre, she went to the draper's. She had bought a bunch of flowers.

Fernande, who lived behind the shop, was in the middle of cooking her dinner. She cried for half an hour.

"This is it," she groaned. "It's God punishing me. I must take back the other one, I must take her back! They'll kill her too! You can't understand how I feel, you simply can't understand."

"But of course I do, of course I understand," said Sylvaine twenty

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times over. "You know very well that I loved them as if they were my own."

"And when is he going to be buried?" Fernande asked.

"On the morning of the day after tomorrow."

"How will you go?"

"In Lulu's car, of course."

"At what time should I come to your place?"

"No, darling, no," Sylvaine replied. "It would be better if you came by yourself. When one's distraught one can never be quite certain what one's saying. It would be really too boring if you made a nonsense . . ."

She took a hundred-franc note from her bag.

"Here you are, take a taxi," she added.

Fernande brushed the note aside.

"Yes, you must," Sylvaine insisted. "And don't bother about the flowers, I'll look after that. I know it's very sad, but I've got to go now. Believe me when I tell you that I'm thinking of you all the time."

"Thank you, thank you, you're very kind," said Fernande.

Sylvaine turned up the fox-fur collar of her coat and said in the tone of voice one uses to console children: "Of course you're coming to my first night. And I'll try to send you some customers, to get your business known, and you'll see, everything'll work out all right."

"Oh, death never works out, you know," said Fernande, her cheeks wet with tears. "Oh, I'd forgotten, I intended to tell you all about it. A man came who asked me a lot of questions, about me, and about you; how long I had known you, and when we left for the south . . ."

"What sort of man?"

"I don't know. He had a brown overcoat. A detective. Not a policeman, though he looked rather like one. It may have been over the capital for the business, you know."

"Could it possibly be Lulu suspecting something?" Sylvaine thought for a moment. "No, that's impossible. Anyway, why the hell should I care now!"

She went off to dine.

In Lulu's estimation Malmaison was "the country." For the purpose of going there, two days later, he ordered no ordinary taxi, but an enormous hired car that was pretty much the same as the Hispano that he had taken to go to Deauville. A huge bunch of arum lilies was placed beside the chauffeur.

When Sylvaine and Lulu drew up at the foster-mother's house, Fernande had already arrived.

Sylvaine fell into her friend's arms, saying: "My poor darling! Always so loyal."

And lowering her voice, she added: "Control yourself, won't you? Please!"

Lulu was concentrating on avoiding the puddles.

It was essential that during the funeral Sylvaine should pretend to weep at least as much as Fernande. She had not to play her part before a large audience; only five people followed the white-covered hearse. Small though the procession was, it still seemed too large. Surely it was excessive to have put a horse to the trouble of drawing so tiny a coffin, and a priest to pray for mercy on such innocence.

"And it would have to be the one who was given my Christian name," thought Fernande.

She would have liked to take the wooden coffin under her arm and go and bury it all alone at the foot of some wall.

The ceremony in the church was hurried through in a quarter of an hour. The cemetery was close at hand and the narrow grave, freshly dug, had walls of sweating clay.

There was a gust of wind, and Lulu carefully crossed his scarf over his chest.

As they came out of the cemetery Sylvaine whispered to Fernande: "Take me back to the car. Look as if you were consoling me."

And Fernande, docile as always, genuinely sobbing, walked beside Sylvaine as if she were supporting her. Then, with lowered head, she went back to her taxi. Seeing her collapse on the seat, Sylvaine thought: "I really am being a bit of a bitch. But that's what life's like; it can't be helped!"

The huge hired car took the Paris road. Lulu sat upright in his corner and gazed out of the window, his face cold and expressionless. This blow of fate did not exactly pain him, it offended him.

Finding herself gently bumping in the other corner of the seat, in the same position, on the same road, with beneath her hand the same beige-coloured upholstery on the arm-rest, and before her eyes the same chauffeur's cap that she had known the previous summer when leaving for Normandy, Sylvaine thought that a whole period of her life, the Lulu period, was drawing to a close.

It was no longer enough to push Lulu little by little out of her life; it was now a question of a clear, precise, effectual break.

Now she wanted to be alone in a similar motor-car, or at least with a companion whose presence made her happy. She no longer wanted morning calls and negative satisfactions; she wanted her new lover to spend the whole night with her.

As she dabbed at her nose for decency's sake, she turned to look at the mute profile beside her with its large, cloudy, protuberant eye.

"It's been nearly two years and a half; he's got nothing to complain about," she thought.

Though she had decided to break things off, she still had to make it clear to her partner.

Sylvaine did not feel brave enough to embark on spoken explanations.

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She would write to Lulu and was already mentally composing the sentences of her letter: "You must understand . . . Of course we shall always remain good friends. You'll be able to see your child as often as you wish . . ."

She thought: "Poor old thing, it'll give him a bit of a shock all the same."

She was somewhat moved, not for him, but for herself, and because she felt she was entering on a new period of her life. She slid her hand along the seat.

Lulu tapped the little outstretched palm with his soft fingers.

"Yes, my poor darling, it's very sad; but I hope the other one will keep well," he said, as if he were adding to himself, "because it's costing me enough anyway."

When he got home he found a summons to a family council in the Avenue de Messine. He did not understand what it was all about. "What the hell are they up to?" he said to himself. "What do they want with me now? A family council indeed! As if I formed part of the family! The swine, and their grandchildren are still alive too!"

IX

The family council had been sitting for half an hour within the green leather walls of the study in the Schoudler house. The magistrate, installed behind the great Louis XV table, in the place usually occupied by Noël, presided as the law prescribed. It was a delicate presidency for him and he felt more embarrassment than pride. He was intimidated by this circle of important old men with coronets on their cigarette-holders, their buttonholes full of decorations, who showed him just about the same degree of politeness that they would have shown a policeman taking a statement about an accident.

From time to time the magistrate slid two fingers inside his stiff collar to pull the edge of his shirt up into place. He said as little as possible, anxious not to commit some error fatal to his career.

His clerk, sitting at the end of the table, had bad teeth and was doodling on his blotting-paper. Every time the word "million" was mentioned, he raised sad eyes.

The paternal side of the family formed the right of the circle. It was composed of the two brothers Leroy, Adrien and Jean, both bald and ruddy, with white spats covering their patent-leather shoes, and of an old cousin, Maublanc-Rougier, who was stupid in a military way, and smoothed his gloves across his knee.

On the other side was Noël, the plaintiff, flanked by the two La Monnerie brothers, Robert the General and Gérard the Minister Plenipotentiary.

The last, having hung on as long as he could to various committees

at international conferences, had now been finally retired. Since the poet's funeral he had grown both thinner and yellower.

Noël Schoudler congratulated himself on the fact that Urbain de La Monnerie, on the excuse of being absent from Paris, had refused to attend the council on which his position as elder brother would normally have required him to sit.

The old Marquis's sudden rages and grumbling fits of generosity might have risked confusing the issue. There was a letter from him giving his agreement; that sufficed; and Noël much preferred having the support of the cold hatred which the diplomat had long felt for Lulu Maublanc.

The General spoke little and blew on his rosette. He seemed to have shrunk somewhat, but his expression was still one of admirable intrepidity. But his main preoccupation was in fact the second prostate operation he was to undergo in a few days' time. Against his stiff leg, beneath the cloth of his trousers, could be seen the outline of a rubber bag which he felt grow heavier as the quarters of an hour went by. Nevertheless, at moments the meeting took his mind off his anxiety.

In the middle of the circle, wedged between the two branches of the family, the paternal and the maternal, as if in a vice, aware of as many disapproving looks turned on him as there were people present, Lulu Maublanc sat silent, his shoulders bowed, his eyes on the ground. Recovered from his first surprise at finding his Leroy nephews there and learning from the magistrate's speech the object of the meeting, he had chosen the part of silence and pretended to be as indifferent as if the matter concerned someone else. But from time to time his waxen jowls quivered above his collar and his long fingers shook. He smoked ceaselessly and flicked the ash on to the carpet. For the last half-hour he had listened to accusations about his life, past and present, his habits, his expenditure, his gambling losses, and the company he kept.

"It is generally admitted," said Noël, "that last summer, my dear fellow, you lost a million and a half in three weeks at the Casino at Deauville. Isn't that true?"

"Perfectly true," said Adrien Leroy, waggling his spatted foot, "and you will remember, Lucien, that I reminded you of it only a little while ago, when I advised you for the last time to be more moderate."

"The swine, the swine," thought Lulu; "they've all ganged up against me, all of them, even Adrien, and it's Schoudler who's fixed it! Very well, let them show their hand; then we'll see." But he felt sick with anxiety. "A legal trustee! A legal trustee! They want to put my affairs in the hands of a trustee, they want to do me down, they want to finish me. Oh, the swine! But I shan't let them. I've still got a trump or two to play."

However contemptible Lulu might be in their eyes, the six old men,

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though gathered together in judgment on a member of the family and agreed in advance on his condemnation, felt nevertheless an uncomfortable sense of the baseness of their motives. They therefore tended to exaggerate their accusations.

The General exhumed old stories of their schooldays. Even then Lulu had been idle and ill-behaved and had been expelled from every school he had been sent to.

"You've always been a disgrace to the family," the General concluded, "and the worst of it is you seem even to be proud of it."

For the first time, and because it was now a question of depriving Lulu of the use of his only power, his fortune, his half-brothers could at last tell him to his face what they thought of him. They added everything their memories could suggest to the list of his crimes.

Lulu flicked the ash from his cigarette; it began to make a little grey heap between his feet. The diplomat sat upright in his chair to indicate that he wished to speak. He let his eyeglass fall into the hand on which he wore a heavy gold signet ring.

"I do not propose," he said, "to pass judgment on our mother, nor on her second marriage. Peace to her soul! God is witness to the respect that we all—if not you, Lucien!—have always felt for her. But it must be admitted that your birth was not altogether welcome to us. And I would hesitate to assert that our excellent mother much wanted you herself. At forty-four one does not have a fifth child by a man who is already over sixty. The proof, my poor Lucien, is that forceps were necessary at your birth, which was not the case with any of the rest of us, and that as a result you have been somewhat abnormal throughout your whole life. At bottom you have not been entirely responsible for all the follies you have committed."

Lulu had been holding himself in for too long. This time he was unable to control his anger.

"That's the real reason!" he cried. "You hate me because I was born at all! You always blamed your mother for marrying a second time, and particularly a man who was neither a Marquis nor a Comte as you are, and whom you therefore despised. In your eyes I'm the result of a misalliance. And that's why you have always been bad brothers to me. Because of course Maublancs, Leroy's, and Rougiers are nothing beside La Monneries! Mere dirt!"

His clumsy attempt to disunite the two branches of the family was vain.

"That's quite untrue," replied the diplomat. "Your father was an extremely respectable man, for whom we always had the greatest regard. Isn't that so, Robert?"

The General, who was discreetly feeling the size of his rubber bag, replied: "As far as I'm concerned, though I really knew him but little, I always got on with him extremely well."

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"We have certainly always been under the impression that there existed the best possible relationship between our Uncle Bernard and his stepsons, as indeed there generally has been between our two families," Adrien Leroy agreed, "and I really don't see the relevance of your outburst, Lucien."

"They're a lot of treacherous swine," thought Lulu. And he heard his cousin Rougier shout impatiently: "Haven't you got an ashtray near you? For heaven's sake use it."

Noël Schoudler turned to the magistrate, who immediately inserted two fingers into his collar.

"To sum up," said Noël, "Monsieur le Ministre is in favour of establishing a trusteeship on the basis of mental debility. That's correct, is it not?"

Delighted to be called "Monsieur le Ministre," Gérard de La Monnerie inclined his death's head with dignity.

"In a minute or two you'll be calling me an utter lunatic!" cried Lulu, his thick voice almost strangled in his throat. "That's what you're all after, isn't it! Well, you can think what you like, but I'm not such a fool as not to be able to see through your little game. And I ask you, as a magistrate, to place on record that I deny these allegations with all the force at my command, and I assert that I am not suffering from mental debility. Go on, put it down! And I'll produce all the medical certificates and all the witnesses in support that you can possibly wish. There'll be no difficulty about that!"

He sat back in his chair and gazed round defiantly at the assembled company. There was a smile of contempt on all their faces.

"What's more, I've had enough of being treated as an accused person," Lulu went on. "What are you blaming me for? For having amused myself? When I look at you, it seems to me that I've done well to do so. And I don't know by what right a man is to be prevented from spending his own money as he likes. Your case hasn't a leg to stand on!"

The diplomat sighed, as if shocked by so absurd a piece of reasoning.

"But that's precisely the point," he said; "that's just what you've been refusing to understand for the last hour. And when I say the last hour, I should say your whole life. You forget that you inherited your fortune in part from our mother, and in part—the most considerable part, I know—from your father. You forget that you received from your parents a patrimony—you may not perhaps realize what that word signifies—and that you are morally accountable to your heirs for that patrimony. If our parents, or our uncles, had behaved as you have, what would be left to us today?"

"Yes, that's the point," cried cousin Rougier, beating his gloves together.

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"I greatly appreciate," continued Gérard de La Monnerie, "the anxiety shown by Baron Schoudler to ensure the preservation of the legitimate patrimony of his grandchildren, who are, since the unfortunate death of my son in the war, our only descendants. Had he behaved in any other way, he would be failing in his duty as a guardian. And I am sure that the Leroy family, in so far as they are concerned, feel the same anxiety."

"Oh, you're speaking of the heirs, are you!" thought Lulu. "Just you wait a moment, my lads. I've got a little surprise for you up my sleeve."

"And what's more, if we allow you to go on playing the fool," said the General, raising his stiff leg, "one day you'll go broke, and not only will you have nothing left to leave anyone, but we'll be responsible for your debts."

Noël intervened once more. "Concerning the question of patrimony," he said, "I expect that Messieurs Leroy are in a position to give us some pertinent facts."

Adrien Leroy made a sign to his brother; Noël made a sign to the magistrate who made a sign to his clerk.

Jean Leroy took a document from his inside pocket and, adjusting the pince-nez on his red nose, read a memorandum on the diminution of Lulu's fortune since he had placed his affairs in the hands of the Leroy Bank in 1892.

"This is certainly a lesson not to choose one's bankers from one's own family," thought Lulu. "The swine!"

"In the last eighteen months alone," Jean Leroy finished, "there has been a diminution of thirteen million, six hundred thousand francs. The rate of expenditure is terrifying, and this in spite of our repeated warnings."

The clerk, wide-eyed, stopped writing. Noël asked that the memorandum should be placed on the file.

"The eloquence of figures . . ." said the diplomat sententiously.

"This is monstrous," cried Lulu, addressing his two elderly nephews. "You know very well that of those thirteen million ten were lost over the Sonchelles affair, in which you yourselves lost five million. Has anybody suggested that you should be subjected to a trusteeship because of that? Today you and Noël are as thick as thieves! But if you hadn't been chicken-livered, if you'd held out to the end . . ."

Lulu turned half-round in his chair and looked at Noël.

" . . . we'd have ruined the lot of you, you, your son, your bank, the whole damned Schoudler clan. I had your son at my feet, do you hear, at my feet, begging me to stop the rot, and that very evening . . ."

The giant's fist came down with a bang on the edge of the Louis XV table and made the lamp shake, as well as the inkstands and the clerk.

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"I forbid you to insult my son's memory!" Noël shouted. "There must be some limit to your shamelessness!"

There was a deep silence in which they could hear his loud breathing. The others all realized that they had no further contribution to make. Schoudler had let them play their parts, he had allowed them to make the first assaults. Now he was going into battle himself. Lulu realized it. He sank back into his chair, and his cloudy eyes were fixed on Noël's dark ones.

"You have just made a very serious statement," said Noël. "You have stated that your financial operations of last June were intended to ruin the Schoudlers. Yet my son, and don't forget it, was your nephew by marriage, and the desire to ruin his family, and the fact of your having put the project into execution in the way you did, is sufficient reason for the establishment of a trusteeship. Our families must take steps to protect themselves against your caprices. And on this ground, among others, I demand that you should be subjected to a trusteeship."

Lulu realized he had made a blunder.

"If I had known," he thought, "if I had known, I would have consulted a lawyer first."

He felt it was time to play a trump.

"All right," he said, with assumed calm, "subject me to a trusteeship. But I warn you that all your happy expectations of inheriting my fortune will be reduced to ashes. You see, I have a child, and I can recognize the child tomorrow if I so wish."

His words did not produce the effect he hoped.

"I won't conceal from you that we've been expecting you to say that," Noël replied. "But what do you mean: *a* child? We've all heard that you've been boasting of twins."

"There's . . . there's only one left," said Lulu in a low voice.

"Ah, one's already dead, is it?"

"Yes, but the other's in good health and you haven't heard the last of it!"

"As a matter of fact we've heard too much about it already!" Noël replied. "Because, my poor chap, not only is that paternity difficult to credit in a man whose marriage has been annulled for reasons that you and I, and indeed all of us here, are aware of—I shall not insult you by emphasizing the fact for, after all, God knows you're not responsible for your physical disabilities—"

"Swine," murmured Lulu.

" . . . but we have also made a few enquiries. And this Mademoiselle Dual to whom you promised in writing and before witnesses in a nightclub to pay a million for every child she had by you—and indeed, Messieurs," went on Noël, addressing the assembled family council, "I really do not know in what category to put the inspiration for such an

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action: immoral and ruinous passions, mental debility—this person of easy virtue is not even the mother of the twins for whom she has managed to get paid two millions.”

“Liar! Liar!” cried Lulu, sitting upright in his chair.

His face had turned chalk-white. Even as his voice cried the words, an appalling fear seized him, the fear of hearing the truth. He was experiencing one of the most terrible moments of his life.

“And is the doctor who brought the children into the world a liar?” Schoudler asked. “This person, of whom for the last two years you have spoken as your mistress, went into retreat with a friend in a village in the Var, supposedly for her lying-in. You agree? Good. Yet the village doctor states that he attended a dark-haired young woman, and it is generally known that Mademoiselle Dual is red-headed. As for the dark-haired young person, who in fact gave birth to twins, and who used to be employed in the cloakroom of a nightclub, she has, since her return, acquired a shop in the Rue La Bruyère with funds whose origin can easily be imagined. Are these facts enough?”

While Noël was talking, Lulu sat half-upright, leaning on the arm of his chair; a whole series of suspicious actions, little oddities of behaviour, which he had not wished to notice, whispers he had never wished to hear, up to and including yesterday’s funeral even, flooded his memory.

For a moment his cloudy eyes remained fixed stupidly on the magistrate; he fell back on the cushion murmuring: “Oh, the little bitch!”

“In your own interests as well as in those of all of us,” Noël concluded, this time with real sincerity in his voice, “I think the time has come to put an end to your folly and debauchery.”

Lulu shrugged his shoulders. He was suffering too much to fight back. He had nearly reached the point where he could feel that Noël was right and approve the punishment to which they were to condemn him.

The council had now only to reach a decision.

The magistrate asked: “Is Monsieur Maublanc-Rougier also in favour of a legal trustee?”

“Yes, yes, certainly.”

“And may I ask you, General, for your opinion?”

General de La Monnerie blew on his rosette.

“As far as I’m concerned,” he said, “it seems to me that there ought to have been one twenty years ago.”

The butt of Lulu’s cigarette was smouldering on the carpet and the Minister Plenipotentiary contemptuously extended a foot to put it out.

“There is still one question, Messieurs, which I must ask you,” the magistrate went on. “Have you any suggestion to make as to who should fulfil the duties of legal trustee? His nomination, I may remind you, is entirely subject to the decision of the Court; but in general the

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Court accepts the opinion of the family council. The legal trustee may be either a member of the family, if a member of it is prepared to fulfil this function for nothing, or it may be some stranger, a lawyer or accountant for example, as is the case . . ."

Noël, frowning, looked at the magistrate, who hurriedly amended his sentence "... as is sometimes the case."

There was a moment's silence.

"I wonder whether there is any point in washing all this dirty linen before a third party," said Noël at last.

"It would certainly be much better if one of us were to discharge the duty," said Jean Leroy, assuming an air of disgust as if the whole business were repugnant to him.

"As far as we are concerned, being already Lucien's bankers," said Adrien Leroy, "we can hardly act in both capacities. Indeed, we would much prefer that there were some extraneous control."

"Well, then . . ." said old cousin Rougier sitting up in his chair.

Noël quickly interrupted him.

"Would you, my dear Minister, in your position as brother . . ." he said to the diplomat.

"Oh, no, no," replied Gérard de La Monnerie. "I hate talking about money and I lack the necessary experience. But what about you, my dear sir? You seem to me to have all the proper qualifications. You're a member of the family without being of it, so to speak; you are eminent in the realms of finance; and if your many duties left you the time . . . Lucien would have a Governor of the Bank of France as his trustee. It would be doing him a great honour."

This polite exchange, whose outcome had been prepared beforehand, passed over Lulu's head without his taking it in. He was too broken. He looked up in time merely to hear the magistrate say: "The family council is therefore in favour of Monsieur le Baron Schoudler as legal trustee?"

The six elderly heads nodded assent.

"Agreed unanimously," said the magistrate with satisfaction.

At that moment Lulu met the giant's eyes and realized the full extent of the misfortune that had befallen him. Lulu had become a ward and Noël was his guardian.

The magistrate took the papers from the clerk, read them aloud, and presented them for signature.

"And you, Monsieur Maublanc?" he said, holding out the pen.

Lulu's face turned red with anger.

"I refuse to sign!" he said.

And turning on them, he shouted: "You're a lot of swine, the whole lot of you!"

He left the study, slamming the door behind him; but as it was padded it made no sound.

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"Well, that didn't go off too badly," the General said.

"No, it might have been worse," said the Minister Plenipotentiary. And he inclined his eyeglass to look at his watch.

"Besides, it was necessary," said Jean Leroy.

"What about a glass of port?" said Noël Schoudler, ringing for a servant.

"And Monsieur," he said to the magistrate, "I should like to thank you and congratulate you on the tact with which you have presided at this council."

When he got home, Lulu went into his drawing-room; the looking-glass showed him the reflection of his own face, shattered, contorted. He had forgotten to take off his bowler; his tie was crooked in his waistcoat. On a salver was Sylvaine's letter breaking off their relations. It made no difference now.

Lulu wished to defy fate that evening, go to his club, play as high as possible.

But, as he was going downstairs, he suddenly seemed to see lightning playing about him and felt hard repeated blows on the back of his neck; clutching the banisters, he went slowly up again.

"Oh, no, no," he whispered. "I'm not going to have a stroke, am I?"

CHAPTER SIX

The Senile

SINCE the death of her son, the Baronne Schoudler had never recovered the freshness of complexion that had been hers. There was a grey and earthy look about her face and she had an abdominal swelling that was becoming more and more obvious. Lartois hesitated to give a definite opinion, and the family were much concerned. At the beginning of autumn she was compelled to take to her bed.

One morning Madame Polant was hurrying up the great staircase when she saw Noël Schoudler and the famous doctor appear at the top. She slowed her pace and backed against the wall. The two men passed her without paying her any attention. They were talking in undertones and Noël's head was bent. He accompanied Lartois to the middle of the hall and waited till the glass door shut behind him.

"Well, Monsieur le Baron?" said Madame Polant, leaving the wall.

Taking advantage of Jacqueline's mourning, Madame Polant had

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little by little gained a foothold in the Schoudler house, had become indeed one of the familiar faces in the establishment.

"My poor Madame Polant," replied Noël, "alas, it's what we feared."

"Oh, dear, I am sorry! Poor Madame la Baronne!"

"Of course she must not be told. I can rely on you, can I not?"

He went to his wife's room and, before entering it, managed to force himself to smile.

The Baronne, her shoulders covered with a lace bed-jacket, turned her grey hair and her grey face on the pillows.

Beside her, on the bedside table, was a photograph of François at the age of three, wearing a little frilled dress.

The autumn sunshine was warming the window-panes and increasing the smell of illness in the room.

"I've got cancer, haven't I?" said the Baronne gently.

Noël stood some way from the bed, smiling his false smile and thinking: "When all's said and done, nobody knows whether it's contagious or not."

He replied: "Why do you cling to that ridiculous idea? I assure you, Adèle, that Lartois said nothing to me that he did not say to you. It may be a fibrous tumour, or perhaps merely a harmless growth..."

She shook her head.

"I know that I shall never get up again," she said. "It will take me about two years to die. That's what cancer's like. I'm sorry for all of you, my dears! It's no fun having someone ill for two years."

She spoke with a sort of resigned certainty. But her eyes sought her husband's reaction. He went over to the window, pulled the curtain aside, and pretended to look out on the garden. He felt emotion pricking at his eyes. "Poor Adèle," he thought, "she's had a hard life... I should have asked Lartois whether he thinks it's contagious..."

He heard from behind him: "It's funny, Noël, you've always lied so well to other people, but you've never been able to lie to me..."

He turned round: the Baronne was gazing at him with eyes that were both gentle and afraid. She reached out a hand to beckon him to her. He came slowly over to her and folded her grey fingers in his large palm.

She pulled him to her as if to give him a kiss.

"You know," she said in a low voice, "you often used to hurt me in the old days... at night. You were so strong... Perhaps my cancer's due to that... I should like it to be due to that... It would console me a little."

Noël, holding his breath, presented the corner of his beard to his wife's lips, straightened up immediately and left the room, rubbing his hands on his handkerchief which was drenched in eau-de-Cologne.

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From that day Jacqueline took the running of the household in hand. If she had not altogether recovered her health, at least she gave the appearance of having done so. She forced herself to be energetic, and her widowhood seemed to have given her a sort of dry authority that was entirely new to her. She took great interest in the education of her children and gave reasonable time to her religious devotions. She also spent many hours on works of charity to which her smile lent an added lustre. But other people sensed in her, as she did herself, a sort of curious automatism as if something inside her had died, like a tree in which the sap no longer flows. This aridity disappeared only in the evening, at the hour when she prayed for François.

To Father Boudret, whom she continued to see regularly, she said: "Though I do my best to follow your counsels, Father, and though I think I lead a reasonably Christian life, I find it impossible to participate in the joys and sorrows of others. Do you really think that goodness is a faculty that can be cultivated, like memory, for instance?"

"To make up for the joy of leading a good life, which is perhaps temporarily denied you," the Father replied, "you will at least have the satisfactions of a woman who does her duty."

And that, in effect, was what Jacqueline, at the age of thirty, was in process of becoming.

The administration of such a large household was not an easy task. Noël was grateful to his daughter-in-law because he felt no alteration in the organization of his life.

It was Jacqueline who finally managed to dissuade old Siegfried from distributing charity to his down-and-outs himself. Cold mornings might be fatal to the Patriarch who, moreover, could nowadays only drag himself along the passages with difficulty, while his mind was beginning to fail for hours at a time. Jérémie, the valet, was charged with the distribution of charity. He did it with the somewhat disgusted air of an archduke and came afterwards to render his account to his old master. Sometimes Jacqueline, wrapping herself in a cloak, went to the door in person to glance quickly with her blue eyes along the queue of the underprivileged.

Week by week the number of beggars increased. Some of them had certainly crossed half Paris to be there. The inspector of police came to ask politely whether it was not possible to stop these gatherings on the public highway which disturbed the peace of the district.

"The day we cease distributing alms," replied Jacqueline, "you'll have a riot on your hands. This particular charity is a tradition in the family and we must continue to dispense it."

Madame Polant found herself being given more and more work as Jacqueline's secretary.

Simon Lachaume often came to luncheon or dinner; in moments of political crisis Noël could not do without him. Simon had to some

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extent become a member of the family, and it was whispered that he was angling for the position of son-in-law.

He was now completely separated from his wife, had his own flat near the Trocadéro, and had told Noël of his intention of getting a divorce.

"Besides," he said, "I wasn't married in church."

"You're quite right," Noël replied. "One commits errors in youth which one later has to wash out. And when you become an active politician, and, my dear chap, you'll be a deputy, oh yes, I'm determined on that, well, you'll need a wife who can help you, from every point of view."

Egotistically the combination would have suited Noël very well. He feared that Jacqueline, if allowed to remarry of her own accord, would leave the Avenue de Messine. If she married Simon, he could be assured of keeping by him two people indispensable to his old age. He was beginning to initiate Simon into the problems of the Bank. "He'll be as competent there as elsewhere," he thought. And when Noël felt the need of justifying the marriage he had in mind, and the fact that it was not a particularly good match for Jacqueline, hardly in keeping, indeed, with her birth, he said to himself: "A woman with two children, even if she's well off, may find it difficult to provide for them. And, anyway, it won't happen immediately."

As for Jacqueline, she had not considered marrying anyone. She had no interest in the men she saw about her, and looked on their attentions merely as manifestations of sympathy in her great sorrow. Her love-life was over. She had decided to remain a widow indefinitely. This attitude was in itself sufficient to keep men at a distance.

As far as she was concerned, Simon was no more than Isabelle's ex-lover, the man who had destroyed her cousin's life, and also, from what she had heard, the lover of her father's last mistress. She had therefore every reason to judge ill of his morals. Moreover, she could not forget the little university student in a threadbare coat whom, a few years earlier, she had seen in the Rue de Lübeck. But she recognized Simon's rapid success, took pleasure in his conversation, and perhaps gave him credit for greater intelligence than he in fact possessed.

In the Avenue de Messine Simon had many times found himself alone with Isabelle. Their relationship was a perfectly normal one. Enough time had elapsed for them to pretend to have forgotten their affair. Isabelle's dark eyes merely rested from time to time somewhat reproachfully on him, but he was courteous enough to bear it for as long as was necessary.

She noticed that the hair was retreating a little from his forehead. She was aware, too, and with some resentment, of his attitude towards Jacqueline, and she recognized it for what it was.

"Simon's in love with you," she said one day to her cousin.

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Jacqueline shrugged her shoulders.

"Don't talk nonsense," she replied.

One day, at the beginning of 1924, a little before Jean-Noël's birthday, Jacqueline, seeing Baron Siegfried coming downstairs to luncheon, cried: "Oh, Grandpapa, what have you done?"

The Patriarch had cut off his whiskers.

"I wished . . . humph . . . to be in the fashion," he said, smiling.

He was delighted with himself; and looked hideous. Suddenly denuded of the cream-coloured fur to which everyone was accustomed, his face looked obscenely naked. People had at least been able to say that he looked like the Emperor Francis-Joseph. Now, beneath the bald skull, there was nothing to be seen but the purple, drooping eyelids and the huge violet-coloured nose between the thin, lined, shrunken temples. He came to the dining-table an old, featureless vulture. Everyone was shocked.

"It's very odd," the Patriarch suddenly remarked amid the silence, "last night I had . . . humph . . . a dream . . . of a most erotic kind. I was in Vienna, and I was . . . humph . . . surrounded by six naked women. How can things of that kind happen at my age?"

After luncheon he did not retire for his usual siesta, but went straight up to his great-grandchildren's day-nursery, a pleasure in which he indulged from time to time, but generally later in the afternoon.

Seeing him enter, Marie-Ange and Jean-Noël looked at each other and sighed. They knew how unreasonable the Patriarch could be, and today his naked face frightened them.

Jean-Noël was drawing a beautiful sailing-ship in red and blue chalks. At the top of the paper he had written: "For Daddy."

"Well now, leave that . . . humph . . . let's play draughts, it'll be much more fun. I want to see how you've improved," said the Patriarch.

The children docilely put out the draught-board and began to play. The old man, sitting beside them, his body bent, his nose practically touching the draughtsmen, followed every move. He was panting, just as he did when speaking, though he remained silent.

Something extraordinary was happening which the children could not understand, but it filled them with disquiet.

"Give me a kiss," the Patriarch said suddenly to Marie-Ange.

Overcoming her repugnance, the little girl obeyed and placed her lips against the vulture's skin.

"Go on, play away!" the old man said.

To have finished the more quickly with the staring purple eyes, with the panting which minute by minute grew louder and terrified them, the children began playing badly deliberately, giving each other openings on purpose and taking each other's pieces three or four at a time. Suddenly the Patriarch rose to his feet.

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"Little idiots . . . humph . . . little idiots . . . humph . . ." he cried. "You don't know how to play . . . humph . . . you don't know anything . . . anything at all!"

He threw the draught-board on the ground and hit it with his stick.

His face turned the colour of port wine. He tore off his collar; he showed the whites of his eyes beneath the red eyelids and, before the children could rush to the door and call for help, he had fallen backwards, full length on the floor.

The Patriarch never regained consciousness and died during the night. As he dressed the corpse for the lying-in-state, under Madame Polant's diligent eye, Jérémie said: "It's a pity that Monsieur le Baron should have chosen this particular day to cut off his whiskers. It spoils his appearance."

This death affected Noël Schoudler perhaps even more than the death of his son. His grief, which had ceased to harass him for several months now, returned. During these days of sorrow he was grateful for Simon's devotion.

"And to think that in four years he would have reached his century," Noël kept repeating. "And now it's I who am old Schoudler. This is how it happens, suddenly, when one least expects it. But I suppose at sixty-eight one is beginning to be an old man."

He began to enjoy retailing his memories, and those of Siegfried, and more distant ones still. Henceforth he was the repository of these family treasures. The face of his grandfather, the first baron, he who had been painted in court dress, came back to him in all its original freshness. He often spoke of it.

"One day," he began, "when my grandfather and my father were both dining with Prince Metternich . . ."

Noël regretted never having had his own portrait painted.

"And what opportunities I missed! Just imagine, I knew Manet, I knew Degas, I knew Henner from almost the start of his career, and then Elie Delauney too. Delauney would have been delighted!"

He decided on a young painter whom Simon recommended to him and whose classical style he approved.

He wished to leave this memorial to Jean-Noël; but, above all, he wanted to see his likeness, taken when he was still handsome, hanging on the wall of the study.

The portrait of Baron Schoudler, Governor of the Bank of France, gigantic, leaning on a solid Louis XV table, was to be exhibited in the next Salon.

During one of the brief sittings Noël asked the painter: "Supposing I gave you a good photograph of my son, would you be able to paint his portrait from it?"

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Noël was as active, powerful and authoritarian as ever; but he was gloomier.

He had lost his only son, he had lost his father, and his wife was slowly dying on the first floor of his house.

Noël had only one pleasure left: that of torturing Lucien Maublanc.

II

Thinner, long-haired, his eyes staring, Lulu Maublanc moved sadly about Paris. His limbs, like those of an aged doll, seemed to be hanging from elastic bands that had lost their resilience.

Six months of constant effort and humiliation to get even the smallest sums of money out of Noël had turned him into a piece of flotsam continually washed in the same direction by the same current.

Since the tribunal had pronounced its sentence, Lulu had sold his diamonds, his pearls, even his furniture to raise money; he had sacked his manservant, given up his lease and was living in a third-class hotel behind the Rue de Rivoli. All the profit on his sales and his economies had disappeared in the gaming-houses where he hoped to recoup himself. He had even sold part of his wardrobe, and his clothes, now no longer properly looked after, had soon begun to look creased and shabby. The only elegance that remained to him was his collection of bowler hats.

Every day at a quarter to ten Lulu left his hotel, took a taxi, and had himself driven to the Rue de la Pompe, where Anny Féret lived. Since the crises he had been through, he had "taken up again," as he said, with the singer. The latter, yielding to the kindly side of her nature, had agreed to the old man's coming to see her in the mornings. But she no longer put herself out for him. If she had a man or a woman in her room, she shut the door in Lulu's face. He made a fuss, but came back the next morning just the same.

On the days when she was alone, she had discovered an easy way of giving Lulu some pleasure without wasting her own time: she dressed in front of him.

Sitting infatuated on the cork-topped stool, Lulu recapitulated his grievances against Schoudler or against Sylvaine, as he watched Anny Féret's plump white body moving about the narrow bathroom with its red-tiled floor.

"They're all swine, the whole lot of them; I've often told you so, darling Lulu," she would reply by way of consolation, folding her arms.

He would place a hundred-franc note on the little glass-topped table, between the toothpaste and the cold cream. She often felt like saying: "No, keep it, you poor old man; you've no more money than I have."

She kept silent, knowing she was being charitable in accepting it. Besides, the hundred francs were sometimes very useful to her too.

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At a quarter to eleven Lulu was to be seen entering the Café de la Paix, sitting down opposite the clock, always in the same place, and unfolding his newspaper. The waiter, without needing to be told, brought him a glass of white port.

It was there that Lulu made appointments, for "eleven o'clock precisely," for the last hangers-on who still made the mistake of approaching him. Poor girls tired of the mean, disorderly lives they led, old night-club acquaintances who had fallen on hard times, ex-waiters who had set up on their own and whose businesses were failing, all these importunate beggars had to cross Paris either by bus or Métro and they invariably arrived late.

At five minutes to eleven Lulu tapped the table and paid his bill for the port. At a minute before eleven o'clock he folded up his newspaper. At the first stroke of the clock he put on his brown bowler and left.

When at two or three minutes past eleven these unhappy people, hoping to borrow five hundred francs, arrived out of breath, the waiter said: "Monsieur Maublanc has been waiting for you! He's just this moment left."

In the meantime Lulu, idling in front of the shop-windows of the Avenue de l'Opéra, could imagine the disappointed face of the idiot "who couldn't even be on time."

If by any chance the beggar was on time, Lulu calmly listened to the embarrassed account of disaster, said from time to time: "Yes, yes, very interesting," and then roundly declared: "I'm sorry; I can do nothing for you at present."

These were what he called his "business appointments." At midday he went to the Rue des Petits-Champs, to the Schoudler bank, where Noël was never available for an interview; then he went home to lunch badly at his hotel, change his suit and hat, and go to the club.

To get through the rest of the day he then proceeded to lose his few francs to those who would still gamble with him.

Noël Schoudler had had him barred from all the gaming-houses, and posted as insolvent in the clubs. Moreover, people did their best to avoid him and it took him three hours of cunning insistence to succeed in making up a table to play poker with limited stakes. Or if he approached a table where the play was fairly high, with an appearance of wishing to say "Banco," an attendant would tap him gently on the arm and whisper with a sorrowful air: "No, Monsieur Maublanc."

Yet, in spite of it all, by the eighth of the month he was practically penniless and, having automatically searched his waistcoat-pockets, he insisted on seeing Noël Schoudler.

His old enemy defeated, the giant was playing a game of hide and seek, at which he was a master, and which gave him unfailing amusement; as for Lulu, he was losing both his health and his reason.

"Monsieur Schoudler has not yet arrived."

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"Monsieur Schoudler hopes you will be able to call again this afternoon."

"Monsieur le Baron is very sorry but he has had to go out."

"Oh, no, Monsieur! Baron Schoudler said he would meet you at the newspaper office, not at the Bank."

After a dozen mornings of failure, after hours spent tapping the floor of an antechamber with his stick and turning over the pages of the same number of *Illustration*, Lulu at last came face to face with his legal trustee.

"My dear Lucien, I don't want you to waste your time," Noël said. "I'm afraid I shan't be able to give you much of an interview today. There's nothing really urgent, is there?"

Choking with rage, Lulu went off, talking to himself, gesticulating, and making passers-by turn to look at him.

These fits of rage, which were becoming more and more frequent, made him ill and worried him. He felt each time as if his neck were being hit with a heavy instrument. During this period his sole moment of happiness was when he heard of the death of his half-brother, the General.

Robert de La Monnerie had never completely recovered from his second operation. The after-effects dragged on with but a few brief and precarious moments of health. In the end uraemia set in and the doctors could give him no hope of recovery. Lulu gave himself the luxury of going to see the dying man in the Avenue Bosquet. The General was half-paralysed; his left eye seemed to be permanently turned down towards his nightshirt, to be searching for some ribbon there, or perhaps for some last grain of dust.

"Where do you want to be buried?" Lulu asked him. "Have you left any directions about your funeral?"

The General made no reply.

"Have you sent for a priest?" Lulu insisted, hoping thereby to be better understood.

The General vaguely shook his head. "He doesn't react to what one says to him; he doesn't care any more," thought Lulu. "I should have come yesterday."

"... Polant!" the General called.

Madame Polant, who had been living in the flat, sleeping on a camp-bed, for the last week, came into the room.

"... ographs," the General said.

She brought him a photograph-album that contained, meticulously ordered, his whole military life, regiment on regiment, horse after horse.

The General signed to Lulu to take one of the yellowed photographs from between the pages. It had no relevance to any of their common

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memories; it showed Robert de La Monnerie as a captain, standing in front of a dozen Madagascan prisoners. He had chosen it because it was a duplicate.

"I'm sure your visit has given him great pleasure," said Madame Polant as she showed Lulu out. "He can't show his feelings now, but he's extremely sensitive!"

Two days later Lulu spent a pleasant evening crossing his half-brother's name off the invitations to his own funeral.

The funeral service was held at Saint-Louis-des-Invalides. The old Marquis appeared once again, his hair brushed up at the back of his head and his eyes sick. He was organizing the funeral in conjunction with the diplomat. Seeing them walking behind the coffin many people said to each other: "Look, there are only two La Monneries left now."

As he always did at funerals, Lulu arrived late.

"You might have put on a tail-coat," the diplomat said. "Both poor Robert and I made the same remark to you at Jean's funeral."

"I no longer have a tail-coat; I've sold it," replied Lulu, "since you reduced me to poverty."

Commandant Gilon, who had sent in his papers soon after the General's retirement, was also present. A neighbour of the Marquis's in the country, he had given him a lift in his enormous motor-car which he drove himself at great speed; as he got out, old Urbain had said that though he no longer much cared what happened to him, he had never been so frightened in his life.

Gilon had grown stouter. Seeing soldiers present arms again, and Charamon, the old servant, carrying the decorations on a cushion, seeing the catafalque covered with a tricolour flag, the dusty standards hanging round the chapel, and hearing the drums beat, all brought tears to his eyes. He murmured: "An admirable piece of ceremonial! Quite admirable!"

Though more formal, and sadder, the funeral recalled that of the poet. The Marshals of France had sent their A.D.C.s to represent them. There were fewer people and they were less important, yet they cared still less for the dead man.

Cheered by the funeral, Lulu spent quite a happy week, and managed to run up a few debts. Then he had to start pursuing Schoudler again immediately.

"Monsieur Schoudler infinitely regrets . . ."

"Baron Schoudler hopes that you will forgive him . . ."

One morning, in a fury, Lulu smacked the secretary's face.

The following morning Noël saw him in the Avenue de Messine. The giant's mood was one of simulated anger.

"So," he cried, leaning over his desk, "you're not only an idler, a

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gambler, and a waster; but you're a bully too, are you? Hitting a woman! All because Monsieur Maublanc, whose day is so full of engagements—seeing a couple of low prostitutes I suppose—can't wait five minutes! All because Monsieur Maublanc, on the pretext that I'm kind enough to bother myself with his affairs, thinks he should take precedence of the Bank of France, the newspaper, and my own family! I forbid you ever to set foot in any of my offices again. And what's more, you're a damned coward, do you hear, a coward! You wouldn't dare attack me. I'm nearly seventy. You try fighting me! You try raising your hand to me!"

Lulu hung his head.

"I'm sorry, Noël, I'm sorry," he said. "I don't know what came over me. I'm horrified to think I could have done such a thing. But it came over me all of a sudden, I don't know why."

"Show me your accounts for last month," said Noël.

He put on his pince-nez and studied the paper Lulu gave him as one looks at household accounts.

"Yes, indeed, I was in the wrong yesterday, I know I was in the wrong. But supposing I kicked him on the shins as he gets out of his chair," Lulu thought.

"What's this, two hundred francs to your hatter?" Noël asked.

"I had my hats ironed."

Noël took up the house-telephone.

"Is Jérémie there? Oh, it's you, Jérémie? How much does it cost to have a hat ironed? Thank you. It costs five francs," he said, hanging up. "You didn't have forty hats ironed, I imagine?"

"I don't know," Lulu cried. "I expect I put down a composite account which includes my taxis, and little out-of-pocket expenses for the whole of that day. I've never understood about keeping accounts! After all, it's you who insist that I do it."

He felt anger, dangerous anger, rising within him. "I mustn't; no, no, I simply must not," he thought.

"If you'd started keeping accounts earlier," Noël replied, "you wouldn't be where you are now. As far as I'm concerned, I've got to have some justification for the money I give you. Last month you asked me for six thousand francs in excess of your monthly allowance, to cover, I know very well, your gambling losses. You had this month's cheque ten days ago. Why have you come to see me?"

"I need eight thousand francs," said Lulu.

"What for?"

"For the dentist."

"You seem to spend your life at the dentist," said Noël suspiciously.

Lulu's fury burst out.

"My teeth are going!" he cried. "Just have a look! Look and see if I'm lying!"

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He held his face close to Noël's, his mouth wide open, grimacing and threatening to bite, as if he hoped to frighten the giant.

"Yes, of course! Clearly, you must get that seen to," Noël said calmly. "All you've got to do is to tell your dentist to send me the bill when he's treated you. I'll settle the account direct with him."

Lulu's hands began to tremble. He thought: "I shall ask the dentist to send in a larger bill and give me the difference."

He gazed straight in front of him unseeingly.

Vaguely he heard Noël, who had risen to his feet, say: "All right, go away, I've got other people to see. It really wasn't as urgent as all that, was it?"

Lulu leapt from his chair, seized Noël by the lapels of his coat and began shaking the giant as if he were a tree, shouting in the meantime: "Swine! You shot your son with a revolver! Swine! I shall tell everyone, I shall denounce you and you'll be convicted of murder. What's more, you had my child poisoned! I shall inform the police! I shall inform the police!"

At the same time he kicked Noël's shins.

Lulu was not aware of Noël's fist hitting him at the corner of the mouth; but so as not to fall over backwards, he clutched a chair and fell to his knees. He felt no pain; merely a cold wave passing through his head, extinguishing the temporary heat of rage. He started laughing inanely.

"Now, get out, get out at once!" Noël said hoarsely.

Lulu rose to his feet.

"I'm sorry, Noël, I'm really very sorry," he muttered.

He left, his shoulders stooping, his hand to his bruised lip, his legs shaking under him.

When Noël, automatically rubbing his shin, described the scene to Lartois two days later, the doctor said: "Take care! Maublanc seems to me to show all the symptoms of senile dementia. You should have him medically examined."

"No, no," cried Noël. "He's no more mad than you or I. He's a bad lot, that's all! He's no different from what he's always been."

For the next six weeks he had no news of Lulu and made no attempt to obtain any.

III

Had the mirrors become tarnished in two years? Had the gilding on the Italian frames faded? Were the chips in the fine porcelain recent, or was it that Simon's eye was becoming, week by week, more critical as his affection for Marie-Hélène Ésterlin waned?

He spaced out his visits to Boulogne.

This gilded, sparkling, fragile house, in which he had spent so many pleasant evenings, now bored him. The poet's presence behind every

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object no longer enhanced its beauty. The bust, that had been moved into the angle of the stairs on the landing, gazed at them with plaster eyes on the rare occasions when they went upstairs together.

Sometimes Simon said, his knees cramped as they sat at the mosaic table: "You really should have your table raised, Marie-Hélène."

And Madame Éterlin would sigh.

Or again, as he passed by the white-and-pink marble-topped commode, Simon would say: "Look, there's a keyhole-frame missing here."

"Yes, I know, I shall have to have it replaced," she would reply. "Oh, you've got a very exacting eye, darling; nothing escapes you."

Madame Éterlin could no longer discover the old expression in Simon's eyes behind his glasses. It was now cold and lucid; she saw his eyes fixed on her as if she were a broken piece of furniture.

Simon gazed in silence at the two lines that were growing deeper each side of her mouth, at the thickening of the down on her lip, the crow's-feet at the outer corners of her eyes, and the wattles beginning to burgeon at the inner.

For two years Simon had taken everything Madame Éterlin could give him. He was now in touch, without any feeling of inferiority, with the best and most fashionable society in Paris.

"I gave her my youth," he said. "Has she ever admitted to me her real age?" The ageing mistress, with her deliberately old-fashioned dresses, was no social use to him. He went out with her as little as possible.

Moreover, it was not only Marie-Hélène that Simon noticed, but himself also. Men often take on the age of their social position: success ages. And Simon, who for a long time had thought of himself as on the threshold of life, suddenly found himself middle-aged.

Every morning a handful of hair came out in his comb. He found himself acquiring a taste for young girls with sound teeth and firm breasts.

He had adventures that lasted a night or two, satisfying his impulses and his vanity, which, when he went to a first night at the theatre, enabled him to count the women he had slept with.

There were, however, many other men in the auditorium who could make a similar calculation; indeed list the same faces; for, in a certain world, and for men who have reached a certain age, love-affairs go round in a circle like a travelling fair.

Madame Éterlin, even if she did not know the women's faces, was well aware of Simon's adventures. Ten years ago she would have made them an excuse for a scene; today she felt a maternal indulgence towards him and closed her eyes to sharing him temporarily with others.

But she could not yet bring herself to believe, when Simon cancelled a six o'clock meeting on the pretext of dining with other men, that the

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pretext was often enough true. Simon found more enjoyment arguing with politicians or senior civil servants in some restaurant till midnight.

Madame Éterlin hoped that she was still desirable and desired.

In their physical relations, which Simon spaced out as much as politeness permitted, she abandoned herself to a sort of conjugal lack of restraint. It was he who put out a hand and turned off the alabaster lamp. The sight of her heavy thighs and their network of violet veins was barely tolerable to him.

Because Simon was becoming increasingly slow at attaining a pleasure that was becoming onerous, Madame Éterlin found increasing satisfaction in it. There was a curious irony in the fact that increasing pleasure on the one side should be accompanied by a lessening of desire on the other.

But when Simon had gone, Madame Éterlin became clear-sighted again. She recognized in him all the signs of a man who was ready for a new love-affair. "I must be prepared to suffer," she told herself. And the mere fact of preparation was already the beginning of suffering.

Sometimes, half out of a sort of coquetry which she hoped was still effective, half out of a need to be reassured for that evening at least, she would say: "I believe, Simon, that it would be wise to break it off at once before we spoil something that has been, indeed still is, so beautiful."

She was cutting off her nose to spite her face.

It was a wretched spring that year. One evening, when it was pouring with rain, Simon arrived in the motor-car he had just bought, his first; he still drove badly, and on the way, wiping the streaming wind-screen, he had cursed Madame Éterlin for living so far out.

During dinner he kept thinking that his coachwork was getting soaked outside, and that he might well find the engine waterlogged. He was also thinking that he had promised Inès Sandoval, the poetess, that he would take her out to luncheon in the country on the first fine day; it looked as if it might rain for the next week.

"Do you know what would be absolutely wonderful?" said Marie-Hélène Éterlin. "To go to Florence and Venice in your car in the summer. I should love to show you Italy."

Simon made no answer. He could well imagine what such a journey would be like, with the memory of Jean de La Monnerie continually beside them.

"I'm a fool," went on Madame Éterlin; "at my age one should not have such dreams. Besides, how can we know what will have happened by next summer? There may be a war. Perhaps we shall no longer love each other."

Simon listened to the rain beating down in the garden.

"It's a terrific storm," he said.

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He noticed that the azalea he had sent a fortnight before was wilting; the drooping petals were turning a pinky white. "I must tell my secretary to go to the florist's tomorrow. She'll have quite a number of errands to do for me . . ."

"Simon . . ." Madame Éterlin murmured.

"Yes."

"Simon, darling, you know it ought to be on some evening such as this, when we can sit silently together because we understand each other so well, that we should give each other back our freedom; before you become bored, and I sad."

She had spoken very gently, very tenderly, very unhappily.

And Simon was enormously tempted to reply: "Yes."

Since she was giving him the opportunity, how wonderful it would be to break it off, break it off deliberately, not as a beaten or snarling cur, impelled by another hunger, but simply so that it should be over, that the dead weight of it should be lifted, that he should no longer have to live a sentimental lie, that everything should become clear-cut, and all for the prize of complete and absolute freedom.

He clothed his reply in a generality.

"There may be," he said, "an ideal moment for lovers to part, as there is an ideal moment for them to meet. But most people haven't the courage to seize that first moment. We ought, I have no doubt, to have the courage to do it, so that we may avoid becoming enemies one day, as others do."

Had she loved him less, Madame Éterlin would have become his enemy at that very moment. As it was, she merely felt as if ice were being injected under her skin.

Her eyes moved over her cabinets, her fans and her spun-glass gondolas.

"You know I'm right," she said.

"You're always right, Marie-Hélène."

She was no longer on the periphery of suffering; she had been suddenly projected into the very centre of it.

She thought: "What, fundamentally, have I ever got out of life? For fifteen years I had a husband whom I did not love. I had Jean, an old man, for eight years. I have had Simon for barely two. No, I'm not going to weep in front of him."

She forced a smile and held her hand out to him over the arm of her chair. No words were necessary. This meeting of their hands did no more than seal a pact of friendship.

"If my engine's flooded, I shall be in a pretty state," said Simon after a moment.

"You can very well sleep here, if you can't get off. I'll make up a bed for you on the sofa," said Madame Éterlin. "You may not be very comfortable, but it'll be better than going on foot in this weather."

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"No, it'll be a bore for you, and for the maid in the morning."

She shrugged her shoulders. Whatever might be thought or said was of no importance to her now.

Simon had never spent the whole night in the house at Boulogne. It would be a mockery that he should be obliged to do so on this particular evening.

The rain lessened. Simon got to his feet.

When they came to the staircase, he stopped, still talking, and placed his foot on the first stair. Marie-Hélène trembled with hope. Would Simon be conscience-stricken, charitable? And would she accept his charity? Yes, of course she would.

But nothing of the kind! Simon was only tying his shoe-lace.

When he had put on his coat, he held Madame Éterlin by the shoulders and kissed her on the forehead.

"I'll see you soon," he said; "I'll telephone you."

She raised her thin, hesitant fingers to Simon's neck and stroked it gently.

"Yes, see you soon," she murmured, "goodbye, my darling, my lover . . ."

She heard Simon's footsteps fade away as he jumped the puddles, and then the clang of the garden gate.

Her forehead against the doorpost, she stood listening. The seconds seemed infinitely prolonged. The engine seemed not to want to start. It fired a few times and then stopped.

"He'll come back, he'll come back and sleep here," she thought. "And everything will come right, begin all over again. He hasn't said what he really thinks. He can't think that."

The engine fired again. Marie-Hélène hardly dared breathe. There was a further silence. "He'll come back and sleep here, and I shall talk to him, I shall talk to him. I shall take his head in my hands and make him listen to me. And then he'll love me again. He's never known how much I love him. I've never dared tell him. He can't take everything away from me! Suppose I opened the door, suppose I cried: 'Simon!'" She stood with her hand on the handle, but she could not make up her mind to it.

The sound of the engine rose triumphantly in the night, louder than the rain on the slates or the wind in the trees. The engine was firing strongly and smoothly, and then came the sound of wheels moving over the wet asphalt.

It was some minutes before Madame Éterlin took her forehead from the doorpost. Through her tears she saw the sticks of jasper glowing feebly in their faience vase, and the bust whose whiteness seemed to light the stairs.

And suddenly she had a moment of illumination.

"It's Jacqueline, Jean's daughter," she thought angrily. "He's in

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love with her, he wants to marry her. That's why he's discarding me. The women of that family have never done me anything but harm."

She preferred it to be another woman who was taking him away from her, rather than admit the truth she could see reflected in every one of her mirrors.

IV

The taxi stopped in front of a high grey stone porch which looked half-way between that of a prison and a reformatory.

"This is it, ladies," said the taxi-driver.

Isabelle got out, followed by Madame Polant, raised her eyes to the pediment of the porch and read: "Asylum." A big faded flag hung over the inscription to prove that here, too, was a portion of the Fatherland.

"Wait for us," said Isabelle to the taxi-driver.

Then, turning to Madame Polant, she said: "It was really very kind of you to come with me, my poor Polant, but you really needn't have bothered."

"Oh, I couldn't have let you come alone. I've been here before; I know what it's like, particularly the first time."

They went in.

"The Director's office?" Madame Polant asked the doorkeeper.

"It's in the big wing on the left, isn't it?"

The doorkeeper nodded his head.

"Ask the attendant on duty," he said.

"You see, I've got a good memory!" said Madame Polant to Isabelle.

The place did not look as sinister as Isabelle had expected.

There were bright, rectangular flower-beds, like those in public gardens, decorating the vast entrance court in front of the administrative buildings. On such a melancholy, misty day, when the air left a sort of sticky dampness on hands and clothes, the sight of the flowers was reassuring. About the flower-beds a few gardeners were working with no undue haste; they watched the two women go by. The men's eyes were curiously staring.

The Director received Isabelle at once.

"I don't understand, Monsieur," she said to him, "why you sent for me. My husband died two years ago without leaving any family but myself. He was the last to bear his name. There must be some mistake, and an extremely unpleasant mistake."

"I know, Madame, I know," the Director replied. "We have made enquiries and that is precisely why..." He was a big, affable man, wearing the insignia of a Freemason in the form of trinkets attached to his watch-chain. He spoke as if he were dictating a letter.

"Owing to the persistence with which one of our patients, who has indeed feigned amnesia for several consecutive weeks, insists that his

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name is Olivier Meignerais, I am obliged to ask you, however painful it may be to you, to see him and give us any information about him you can. It's perfectly possible," the Director went on, "that you've never seen him before in your life. He may be some very distant relative of your husband, or some tradesman who supplied him in the past, or even someone who never even spoke to him. The insane frequently adopt personalities other than their own with complete illogicality, that's exactly why . . . Can one ever discover why a patient wants to adopt someone else's name? I'll have the Chief Attendant show you the way."

The Chief Attendant was an ex-sergeant of the Colonial Army who wore his cap on one side of his head and his white coat open over his uniform to display the ribbon of the *Médaille Militaire*. He was about forty-five and had little pig-like eyes in a moon-face. There was something disquieting in the way he moved his fat buttocks. He had clearly once been good-looking. What had led him to end his life in this odd profession in which he seemed so content?

"We cross the courtyard," he said.

He unlocked a door, let the two women through, and locked it carefully behind them.

Isabelle felt as if she were entering a vault.

There were no flowers here. High walls rose on every side like the walls of a pit; there were a few sad-looking trees whose buds never burst. Even the fog was thicker here, greyer, more oppressive.

All along the way Isabelle and Madame Polant passed little old men dressed in coarse blue cloth, wearing huge Basque *bérets* which made them look childish and grotesque. They were trotting along on errands that had no meaning except in their own imaginations, living in the exile of old age from which there is no return, in a double seclusion of the physical and the mental. Bent, broken, emaciated, scraping the gravel with their feet, they surprised one at first sight by their bowed bodies. It was as if, approaching death, they were endeavouring to recapture the posture of their birth, and their brittle bones were trying to conform to this peculiar necessity.

Or, standing still, leaning against wall or tree, they seemed lost in contemplation of the passing of the time that remained to them, listening to the rhythm of their own shortening breath. Without abandoning their peculiar stupor that seemed to consist, and to have consisted throughout the years, in listening for the approach of a distant step, their eyes would fasten on a visitor as he entered the courtyard, cling to him, follow him, become a little brighter, a little more disquieting as he came nearer; and then they would follow him to the further door, their heads returning to the accustomed position, their eyes fixed once again on the void.

An old man, his face tortured by some profound anxiety, folded and

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refolded his grey woollen scarf across his chest and each time tapped nervously at his breastbone.

Another, sitting on the ground at a corner of the building, was playing an imaginary drum. He had pulled his wide *béret* into a peak, upright on his forehead, like policemen's caps in the Second Empire. He, too, never ceased gazing at the women, but never for a moment stopped playing his phantom drumsticks, muttering the while: "Brrmm . . . brrmm . . . brrmm. Brrmm . . . brrmm . . . brrmm."

Isabelle did not know where to look. She felt a growing unhappiness, a longing for the nightmare to come to an end. But the Chief Attendant was in no hurry. With a smile at the corner of his mouth, tripping along, he advanced with all the satisfaction of the curator of a museum showing off his collection. He produced unending information. "The younger ones are in the other part of the building. One can't put them with the senile, because they bully them. I don't suppose you find this lot very interesting, do you? Don't worry, we shall be passing by the howling maniacs."

They came to a door; then another door; as Isabelle walked on, she heard a crescendo of sound, sharp, syncopated, rising towards the grey sky, made up of a variety of cries, howlings of wolves, imprecations, groans of wounded animals, and whistlings of locomotives. The howling maniacs were shut into smaller courtyards behind bars. There was nothing human about them. These lunatics produced only a bestial imitation of human anger; where, indeed, there was still imitation at all. Most of these creatures, shut in behind their bars, occupied a special place in the scale of primates, one in which the mere fact of having once possessed the power of reasoning now placed them in a lower category than if they had never had it at all.

The arrival of the visitors, particularly that of Isabelle, increased their violence; their maniacal eyes were concentrated on her youth, and it was to her that they addressed their cries. Some threw themselves against the bars, shaking them with their talon-like hands, making fearful grimaces; others shook their fists; others again let down their trousers in an obscene gesture that lacked even the visible signs of desire.

The whole place stank like a kennel.

Inevitably Isabelle remembered a walk with Olivier, on a grey day rather like this, past the cages of the Zoo, and she heard again her husband's voice, that husband whose name had brought her here today, saying: "Oh, decline can be no more fun for animals than it is for man!"

She saw Olivier once more, his eyes showing their whites, vomiting blood; and a moment later she was suddenly transfixed by the thought that Olivier was not dead and that it was really he whom she would find in one of these cages. In this Gehenna all seemed possible; the past

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lost its certainty and assumed the inconsistencies of a dream. What could she be certain of? What memory was certainly not an hallucination? Her uneasiness increased.

"The important thing is to know how to manage them," the Chief Attendant explained. "I must say, I know something about it. I was a bit crazy myself for a time; the colonies, you know, pretty tough, eh? So you see . . . But this is nothing today," he went on, "you should hear them at the full moon; that's a pretty how-d'ye-do. Of course, in one way it's quite understandable; to know what the moon's like you've got to have seen it rising over the desert . . ."

As he spoke of the moon, his expression grew strained; the puffiness round his little eyes seemed to diminish, his smile grew vague . . .

There was the men's wing, and then the women's. The old women were imprisoned too, their long grey hair hanging down their cheeks, their eyes hungry, their breasts swinging about their waists.

Then, suddenly, the clamour, that might have been rising from an equatorial jungle at a moment of alarm, ceased, as if a bird, passing overhead, had given some mysterious warning. The senile monsters, now grown calm, though without apparent reason, all came forward to stand side by side against their iron bars.

A somewhat corpulent creature was advancing firmly down the alleyway; his clothing was neither that of a man nor of a woman; a flat black hat, a long black cloak that reached to his feet, beneath which could be seen the hem of a white robe. When he was twenty yards away, Isabelle recognized Father Boudret, her cousin's confessor.

The Dominican came up to the two women and greeted them.

"Yes," he said, replying to a question of Isabelle's, "I come here every visiting day I can. Two old penitents of mine are here. And I believe that I would still come here even without them."

Madame Polant, fawning, mewed: "Yes, Father . . . Oh, how good you are, Father . . ."

"And it was you, Father, who said that Hell did not exist," said Isabelle indicating their surroundings.

"Precisely, Madame; this is Hell. The good Lord has given men old age as an expiation of their sins, and I believe it is sufficient. All forms of old age are an expiation."

While he was speaking thus, the eyes of the old lunatics were all turned on him in silence. And he himself, carrying his square head majestically high, gazed steadily at the cages.

"But do you believe, Father, that they know?" Isabelle asked. "Surely they have no awareness any more."

"Enough to suffer," the Father replied; "and I assure you that they suffer appallingly. Those who have still complete or intermittent powers of reasoning, because they are conscious of their plight, and those who have it no longer in another form, but as cruel a one. It

is said of some lunatic that he *believes* that he is a pair of pincers; it is not true, he *wants* to be a pair of pincers, and everything tends to show him that he is not, and he hits out at the general refusal, not only on the part of men but on the part of the whole of creation, to make it admit that he is such. His limbs themselves contradict him, and he can find no hold to seize on. Believe me, that form of suffering is no laughing matter; perhaps it's even the worst of all."

He said goodbye and went on his way towards the door.

"One must admit," said the Chief Attendant sententiously, "that each time that priest goes by, all the howling maniacs grow quiet. It's odd. He's got a way with them, one's got to admit it. He'd have been a good attendant."

Isabelle felt comforted by this meeting.

V

When Isabelle and Madame Polant came to the ward of the bedridden, the visiting hour was coming to an end. There were a few people coming down the stairs, mostly women with empty baskets, drying their eyes.

"Do you think we shall see poor P  p   again," said an old woman with grey hair. "It's the last time, eh?"

"Oh," replied another, "in one way, Mother, it's rather to be hoped for. It would be a great relief for him, and for everyone else."

"Oh, yes, you're quite right, seeing them end like this . . ."

Behind the door of the ward a little old man in shirt-tails, his hands clinging to the door-handle, his eyes fixed on the wooden panel, kept repeating to himself in a tone of agonizing unhappiness: "Mimi! Mimi! Mimi!"

At seventy he was like one of those nightmares one has in childhood, when one dreams that one is lost in a crowd, abandoned by one's parents.

The Chief Attendant led him away.

"All right, Grandpa," he said, "Mimi'll come back, she'll come on Thursday. Go on, go back to bed, you don't want to be carried there, do you?"

And the little old man in the shirt went back to his place.

The bedridden lay in rows along both sides of the ward in white iron beds, the same kind of beds as may be found in any hospital, the beds in which women give birth to children, and in which the old fade gently into the arms of death.

Beside each bed was a little table that was also a locker in which the patients kept their personal belongings, such belongings as were allowed; photographs were rare; parcels of acid-drops and biscuits were more frequent, because it was visiting day. And then there was a

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variety of little knick-knacks, a little wooden clog, a metal button like those worn by gamekeepers, a notebook.

Several of the old men were eating the food that had been brought them, pushing it greedily into their mouths as they watched Isabelle and Madame Polant pass with those same staring, lightless eyes that they had noted on all sides since they had entered the asylum.

A bald man was playing with a rosary. The Chief Attendant snatched it from his hands, saying: "Forbidden, and you know it."

And as Madame Polant looked indignant, he explained: "One never knows what they may not do. He might strangle somebody with it, or hang himself."

Isabelle noticed an old man of the most dignified appearance, who was passing a little comb through his fine, full beard that looked like an Indian prince's. He courteously gave Isabelle an inclination of the head and then went on combing his beard. There was a nobility about his forehead and his gestures.

Lucien Maublanc was right at the end of the ward, in the last bed of the left-hand bay, or rather Lulu Maublanc's body was there. He was lying flat on his back, his eyelids closed over his protruding eyes, his face appallingly sunken.

His breathing, which was slow and feeble, emerged through lips that revealed his tongue each time they parted.

The two women were shocked when they saw him and looked at each other.

"What's this? How can it have happened?" Isabelle murmured.

"So you know him?" asked the Chief Attendant.

"Yes, of course. He is the half-brother of one of my uncles-by-marriage, and a connection of my husband's; indeed, I can give you any information about him you may want."

Then to Madame Polant she said: "Monsieur Schoudler must be told at once, or his Leroy cousins. I don't know what to do, but he must be got out of here and put in a private asylum."

The Chief Attendant looked annoyed.

"He won't be any better off elsewhere," he said; "you can of course insist, but look for yourself, it would be a waste of money."

"You think he'll . . ."

The Chief Attendant shook his head and pouted his lips.

"I see a lot of them, you know. I've got experience. So if I tell you for a fact . . ."

Madame Polant whispered into Isabelle's ear: "I agree with the attendant. He won't last long."

"But how did he get here?" Isabelle asked.

The Chief Attendant briefly recounted what he knew: Lulu, clinging to the gate of the Métro at the Bastille station in a mad state, his being taken to the depot hospital and to Sainte-Ann, and then being sent to

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the departmental asylum and placed in the incurable section. Having been picked up without a single identifying paper on him—it was not known whether he had lost them or deliberately destroyed them—he had feigned amnesia for some time.

"I've forgotten, I've forgotten," he had said, "but it doesn't matter; I've no family any more."

Then, one day, without being questioned, he had suddenly announced that his name was Olivier Meignerais and that he was married.

While this conversation was going on in an undertone, Lulu Maublanc had not altered his position at all.

"Does he sleep like this all the time?" Isabelle asked.

"He's not asleep, he's pretending to be. When he's really asleep he doesn't breathe through his mouth, but it amounts to pretty much the same thing.

Lulu's neighbour seemed to be paying no attention to the visitors. Sitting up with bent back he was writing on his knee, interminably, with a minute pencil. He only stopped to say to the Chief Attendant in a hurried voice: "Tomorrow! Paper! Without fail! Paper!"

Beyond Lulu's bed was the space allotted to the shower-bath: there was a large hose-pipe lying across the floor.

"Wake up, Grandpa," said the Chief Attendant.

Lulu did not stir.

"Come on, Monsieur Meignerais, now come along . . ."

"No, not Meignerais," said Isabelle frowning; and she whispered to the attendant: "Maublanc is his name."

"Come on, Monsieur Maublanc!"

Lulu went on puffing between his lips.

He could perfectly well hear that he was being spoken to, but did not wish to open his eyes, *could* not open them, for he was in a condition between dream and consciousness, and something utterly divorced from reality was going on in his mind.

He was walking towards the Place des Ternes. A woman had just kissed him. He was happy. He knew that at the top of the Avenue de Wagram he would meet two more women who would lead him to the top of a house with a slate roof and small windows, a house into which he had never been before but knew well, since he had been seeing it in his dreams for years. He was walking with his eyes shut and crossing the Place. He could hear the traffic about him. He must open his eyes or he would be run over. But if he opened his eyes he would no longer see the two women of the Avenue de Wagram, and the house with the little windows. And it was much more interesting than answering the attendant.

The male nurse who was walking slowly up and down between the rows of beds said to the Chief Attendant: "He's a case, isn't he? You ought to see him sometimes though. To make him keep quiet . . ."

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On Lulu's bedside-table there was no notebook, notecase or packets of sweets, none of the things that were to be seen on the others, merely four little flat parcels carefully folded.

"Yes, it's one of his manias," said the Chief Attendant, seeing Isabelle glance at them; "he picks up stones and wraps them up in pieces of paper."

At that moment the Indian prince made a grand and haughty gesture from the other end of the ward to attract the male nurse's attention.

"There he goes again," said the man to the Chief Attendant. "You'll see what a swine he is! I'm sure he's at it again. But this time..."

And indeed he was right. The man with the round, carefully trimmed beard put his hand beneath the sheets and extracted a piece of excrement in his fingers, holding it out to the attendant. He manipulated it with the dignity that was implicit in his every gesture. He liked cleanliness and things to be in their proper place. But to change his sheets a pitched battle was necessary. The attendant, his patience exhausted, cried: "That's enough! I'm fed up with you. Get under the shower!"

With the assistance of another attendant, he dragged the bearded man along the ward and stripped him.

The sound of water in the pipe seemed to rouse Lulu from his simulated sleep and a smile appeared across his lips.

Suddenly Isabelle started and turned about. Who could be singing here, in such a warm, firm, pure voice? It was the little old man who a few minutes before had been groaning: "Mimi, Mimi..." And now, apparently to drown the shrieks from the shower, he was singing:

Mais quand reviendra le temps des cerises...

Then Lulu sat up, raised his eyelids, and looked round at the world with those cloudy eyes that had no need to change their expression now that he was mad; he gazed at the unfortunate man under the shower struggling against the jet of water and then at the skinny little man singing:

Les filles auront—la folie... en tête...

And a wide smile spread over his deformed face.

"Well, you've got visitors today," said the Chief Attendant in the middle of the hubbub.

"Oh, yes, visitors," Maublanc repeated stupidly.

His slow, hoarse voice still came from the right corner of his mouth, but as he had no teeth on that side, he produced a sort of wet, whistling sound.

His eyes came to rest on the two women.

"How do you do, how are-you?" he said.

THE SENILE

"Do you recognize me?" Isabelle asked.

"Perfectly, you're Isabelle, Jean's niece."

He turned towards his neighbour who was still writing with the utmost speed, and said: "Ah, you see, I've got visitors too."

As he turned, Lulu showed his neck on which was a long brown gash with four stitches in it.

Isabelle's horrified eyes turned to the Chief Attendant.

"He did that on his last walk; he fell backwards against the curb," he replied. "Well, what's your name?"

Lulu shrugged his shoulders and his vacant eyes seemed completely absorbed by the patient opposite him who was eating.

Madame Polant took a biscuit from her bag—she always had a few biscuits about her to nibble, or liquorice sweets to suck—and handed it to Lulu.

"Cake," he said, extending a trembling hand.

With the avid hunger of a child he stuffed the whole biscuit into his mouth at once, and put out his hand for more.

Madame Polant gave him another, which disappeared as quickly. The sound of running water had ceased, the Indian prince had been dried and was being put back to bed.

The skinny little man had stopped singing though he had not reached the end of his song.

The ward had once again become a room full of quiet patients, busy with their little tasks, their calm little thoughts.

Lulu looked intently at Isabelle, examining her hat, her dark eyes, her fur collar. He murmured: "Are you a good girl? Are you? Well, if you're a good girl. . ."

He put out his hand towards the little parcels on his bedside table.

"Here, this is for you; it'll suit you."

"Thank you," said Isabelle, taking the little parcel.

She found difficulty in speaking.

"That's right," said Lulu; "you don't refuse to take it."

"Is there anything I can do for you?" Isabelle asked. "Is there anything you need? What would give you pleasure?"

"Nothing, nothing at all. I don't need anything. I'm very well looked after, everyone's very kind to me," replied Lulu, looking timorously at the Chief Attendant.

Then, pulling at Isabelle's sleeve, he whispered: "You can tell my brother Jean that I'm going to find Mama; she won't scold us."

Isabelle nodded and hid her face in her hands. However unworthy Lulu might have been throughout his life, this man, who still possessed in his own name an enormous fortune and no more real wealth than a few stones wrapped in pieces of paper, this king of the gambling-house and the night-club, who was addressed as "Grandpa" by an ex-sergeant of the Colonial Army, this old man who confused the living with the

THE MAGNATES

dead, but was conscious of the near approach of his own death, could not but inspire compassion, and Isabelle recalled Father Boudret's recent words.

Madame Polant, with her rabbit-skin boa and the wart on her chin, had bent down with Isabelle from curiosity to catch Lulu's confidences. It was only then that he seemed to recognize her and it produced in him a curious access of anger.

With flashing eye he pointed his forefinger at Madame Polant, and murmured: "You old bitch! You old bitch!"

"Then, his voice rising, he cried: "It's you! It's you! It's you! It's your fault! It's all your fault! I shall tell the police, the police!"

He crawled down the bed on his knees, holding his hands out before him as if he wished to seize Madame Polant by the throat.

The two women drew back in terror.

"Now then, Grandpa, calm down," said the Chief Attendant, trying to get Lulu back into bed.

But the paroxysm was only beginning. Lulu had seized hold of the iron bars, was shaking them, and uttering incomprehensible cries, wagging his deformed head like an old puppet. It was incredible that his emaciated body, which a quarter of an hour before had looked like a corpse, should now be able to muster so much strength. A few of the other patients turned to stare at him, but his neighbour merely went on writing. The Indian prince was combing his sodden beard with magisterial dignity. And the skinny little man was singing once again: *Mais quand reviendra . . .*

"Baptiste!" the Chief Attendant called. "Lend a hand here."

The attendant arrived just as there was a crash by the bed. Lulu had succeeded in hauling himself out of bed and had collapsed with his bedside-table.

He dragged his naked buttocks across the white stone floor, hitting the attendants' shins with his fists, still shouting for the police.

"Get a strait-jacket!" said the Chief Attendant.

Then, turning to the two women, he said sourly: "You'd better go, ladies; you can see what effect your presence has . . ."

Isabelle and Polant quickly retreated down the long ward. Before they reached the door they heard Lulu shout: "You see what they're doing to me! You see how they treat me! Call the police!"

They turned round. Lulu had been put into the strait-jacket. Only his head and its huge purple temples rose howling above the thick grey cloth.

"He's having an attack," said Madame Polant.

There was a sound of hard slaps falling on that pitiable face.

When the ambulance ordered by Schoudler arrived the following morning to take Lulu to a private asylum, the old man was dead.

THE SENILE

The distribution of the millions he had left was already settled among his heirs.

As the address at which he had died could not be mentioned with propriety, there were naturally no invitations sent out for the funeral.

Noël Schoudler, who no longer had any secrets from Simon Lachaume, informed him of Lulu's death and said: "And do you know what the old brute did in the end to put us in the shit—for there's really no other word for it? He went and died in an asylum!"

A fortnight later there was a discreet announcement in the *Figaro*. The families of Fauvel de La Monnerie, Leroy-Maublanc, Maublanc-Rougier and Schoudler announced the death of Monsieur Lucien Maublanc in his sixty-second year. The funeral had been strictly private.

And indeed Madame Polant, delegated by the family, had followed the coffin alone.

BOOK TWO

FEET OF CLAY

To Roland Dorgelès

The Blind Man's Hunt

THE old man wore a long coat of daffodil yellow with black facings laced with gold, and breeches of black ribbed velvet. His hands, which were thin and blotched, though still finely shaped, their ridged nails cut short, rested on his thighs as if on cushions. On the little finger of his left hand was a large cornelian signet-ring.

The glow of the fire gleamed red on the stone of his ring, on the lace of his coat and on the leather of his boots, showing up the creases at the ankles.

The old nobleman, reclining in his wing-chair, sat with his head bent slightly forward; his skull, three-quarters bald, still preserved at the back a stiff crown of white hair, brushed upwards, and the heavy dew-laps beneath his chin hung down on his double-pointed piqué stock, held in place by a pin decorated with stag's teeth.

A clock in the room struck six, and then two further, shriller strokes to mark the half-hour.

Still half-asleep, the Marquis de La Monnerie thought: "It must be dark by now; I wonder if they've killed?"

He heard the fire crumbling. He did not move; he knew that there were brass fireguards in front of every fireplace.

"I wonder where I am?" he thought. "In the little drawing-room. Then which fireplace is it? The one with the gryphons or the one with the Muses?"

He got up, prudently raising a hand to avoid knocking his head against the huge block of Renaissance stone that formed the front of the chimneypiece. His fingers, shaking slightly, strayed over the carving and recognized the winged figures, the lines representing hair on the thighs, the paws ending in sharp claws. Yes, it was the fireplace with the gryphons, with here and there the great "M" of the Mauglaives, formed of swords, on the vertical jambs and surmounted by a large coronet. The other fireplace, the fireplace with the Muses, was one of those in the great drawing-room.

"So much the worse," thought the Marquis; "I'm beginning to forget even my own house."

He felt for the arm of his chair and sat down again with a sigh.

FEET OF CLAY

The Marquis de La Monnerie was eighty-four. An operation for double cataract, undergone a few years earlier, had not prevented his going blind. On days of bright sunlight he could still just see a grey square where the window was, like a sheet hanging in the dark of the night; and a distant, barely perceptible glow marked, on certain evenings, the lighting of the lamps. He lived within a huge dead pearl.

Sometimes, when someone moved between him and the light he distinguished a shadow and thought: "God bless my soul! I've actually seen something." But week by week these last vestiges of the gift of sight were disappearing. The Marquis knew very well that the servants and the rare relatives he met in the passages of the château would soon lose even their appearance of being souls in the process of disembodiment; indeed, Mauglaives was already, so far as he was concerned, nothing but a huge tomb filled with echoing voices.

The door opened. Jacqueline Schoudler came in, followed by a tall officer of the Spahis.

"It's me, Uncle Urbain," she said; "it's Jacqueline."

Whenever she came into the room and found the old man sunk in his chair, she feared he was dead.

The Marquis sat up.

"Well, did you kill?" he asked.

"I don't know, Uncle," Jacqueline replied, throwing her three-cornered hat and her crop on to the marble console-table. "I lost the hunt in the Combe-aux-Loups marsh; and it was getting dark. I'm absolutely furious! Luckily I met Captain De Voos, who was lost too. That was some consolation, and we've ridden home together. I asked him to come back to tea."

She was small, very light of body and bone, her neck slender, her eyebrows arching high on her forehead, and she was dressed wholly in black. The skirt of her habit, stained with clayey mud, was fastened at the hip to enable her to walk.

The young woman sat down in the armchair on the opposite side of the fireplace, powdered her nose, and ran a comb quickly through her hair. Her delicate appearance contrasted with her clothes.

"Who's that? De Voos? A Captain De Voos? Don't know him," grumbled the Marquis.

"But you do, Uncle; he's a guest of Gilon's. He was introduced to you this morning at the meet. He's here, with me," Jacqueline explained hastily.

"Oh, good! Excellent!" said the Marquis.

"I'm abusing your hospitality, Monsieur," said the officer.

Unintentionally he had spoken too loud, as if he were addressing a deaf man, and he heard his words echoing in the high, coffered ceiling.

The Marquis raised his eyelids and turned his pale eyes, which though

THE BLIND MAN'S HUNT

devoid now of pigmentation were still frightening, towards the officer's voice.

"Jacqueline, what does the Captain look like?" he asked.

The young woman, half-amused, half-embarrassed, looked at the tall Spahi and could find no better solution than to adopt a tone of ironic gravity.

"Well, Uncle, he's very tall," she replied; "well over six foot."

"Six-foot-four," said De Voos to show that he was taking the game in good part.

"His hair is chestnut-coloured. Let's see, is it dark or light chestnut?" she went on, pretending to inspect him. "No, dark chestnut. He's wearing a splendid red uniform and he's very good-looking. There!"

"Thank you!" said De Voos, bowing.

"How old is he?" asked the Marquis.

"Thirty-seven, Monsieur," replied De Voos.

And, turning to Jacqueline, he added: "Now you know all about me."

There were a few seconds of silence. Jacqueline leaned forward to poke the fire, revealing, under the black velvet collar and white stock, her frail and slender neck, on which grew a misty, golden down almost like a child's.

"Are you going to marry him?" said the blind man suddenly.

Jacqueline started.

"Really, Uncle," she cried laughing, "I told you that I've only known Monsieur De Voos since the meet this morning."

Then, feeling the officer's eyes on her, she said: "I must tell you that my uncle is determined to marry me off. It's his hobby. You needn't worry; you're in no danger."

Unsure of what attitude he should adopt, De Voos contented himself with spreading his hands in a fatalistic gesture.

"But she *must* marry again! I know what I'm talking about!" cried the Marquis, banging the arm of his chair.

"Really, please Uncle Urbain!" Jacqueline interrupted him, with some vexation.

And to change the conversation she went on: "What makes me absolutely furious is that Laverdure will take his stag all by himself."

"How much ground did we cover today? I don't know the country; and I'm a bad judge of distances," said De Voos. "Thirty to thirty-five miles?"

"Oh, no! Barely twenty-five," replied Jacqueline.

"You'll certainly have harder days, Monsieur, if you do us the honour of another visit," said the Marquis.

FEET OF CLAY

II

Jacqueline and the officer were finishing a substantial tea when the head huntsman came in.

Short, strong, squarely built, his skin hardened by the weather, his hair greying, his features curiously regular and distinguished, with a quick flinty eye, the head huntsman was beginning to have to contend with the years. Holding himself very straight in his muddy boots, their tops reaching the middle of his thighs beneath the hem of his yellow livery coat, the thong of his hunting-crop round his neck, his horn about his chest, hunting-knife at hip and cap in hand, he stood before the Marquis.

"Well, Laverdure?" said the latter.

"Well, Monsieur le Marquis, I can't understand what happened," replied the huntsman. "I can't tell you how disappointed I am. Good God almighty!"

"You needn't swear, Laverdure!"

"I ask Monsieur's pardon and also Madame la Baronne's," said the huntsman; "but Monsieur will understand what I mean. A stag I'd have killed in half an hour at most. The last time I saw him his tongue was hanging out. And then, suddenly, not a smell of him; it was as if the devil had hidden him under his cloak. Monsieur le Marquis must admit it might be witchcraft!"

He shook his head unhappily. The hunting cap had made a red line across his brow.

"Will you take a glass of wine, Laverdure?" said Jacqueline.

She was not altogether displeased that the head huntsman had lost the stag.

"Madame la Baronne is too kind," replied the huntsman, instinctively turning his eyes to the blind man.

The latter, as if aware of the gaze resting on him, said: "Yes, yes, have a drink, Laverdure."

He took up a bronze bell with a wooden handle resembling those used in schools to mark the end of a break. It rested on a little table within reach of his hand, and he rang it lengthily.

An old man, dressed in a French-style livery of thick, bottle-green cloth, appeared. He advanced with dragging step; his trousers looked as if they needed bracing up; his heavy, bent body emitted a wheeze of permanent breathlessness while his swinging jowls were like an old bull's.

"Monsieur le Marquis rang?" he asked.

"I want my hunting-box," said the blind man.

"Perhaps Monsieur Laverdure will help me," said the old man in the green livery, turning to the huntsman.

"Of course, Monsieur Florent," replied the huntsman, putting down his empty glass.

THE BLIND MAN'S HUNT

The two servants, who had ruled for many years one over the household and the other over the kennels and stables, normally addressed each other in more familiar terms, but in the presence of their master they used a certain ceremony.

De Voos watched them go to a curious piece of mahogany furniture, something like an old backgammon table but three times larger. They placed it in front of the blind man. The latter coughed to clear his throat, rose to his feet, felt in the skirts of his coat for his handkerchief, spat, wiped his mouth with care and sat down again. Standing in his waisted coat, he resembled those Mauglaives Marshals from whom he was descended, whose cracking, blue-ribbanded portraits glowed dimly on the walls—an old Marshal of the Seven Years' War, who had forgotten to put on his wig and allowed his moustache to grow.

Laverdure, saying "If Madame la Baronne permits," brought near a huge paraffin lamp mounted in a Chinese vase. There was no electricity at Mauglaives.

"When one comes to think of it, every face has its period," thought De Voos. Jacqueline's seemed to him completely Louis XVI. "That's precisely it, the generation that follows on..." His eyes moved automatically to the thin line of vertebrae in her slender neck.

He noticed that no one in the room, master or servant, was wearing ordinary clothes either in shape or colour. With his red jacket and gold spurs, which normally made people turn round in the street, he felt he was the only person present who was dressed in contemporary fashion. Though he was far from imaginative or, indeed, unusually responsive to the romantic, he had the impression nevertheless of having been transported to a place where the centuries had been abolished, where people never died, where those who had been guillotined still kept their heads on their shoulders, and he would not have been overmuch surprised to see, suddenly stepping from the panelling, a Grey Musketeer or a lady-in-waiting to Catharine de Medici.

"What the hell am I doing here?" he thought.

Florent removed the lid, the top of the mysterious table. Within was a relief map, detailed and large, of all the country round Mauglaives.

When he had felt he was lapsing irremediably into darkness, the Marquis had ordered this expensive and unique piece of furniture to be made for him. Though its user was blind, the craftsman had been conscientious enough to colour the streams blue, the roofs of the villages red, and the spinneys in the fields green. The result was a cross between a prince's plaything and the sand-table used in military schools for preparing exercises.

The Marquis stretched out his hands; the cornelian signet-ring glinted in the lamplight. The old tendons contracted. The closely pared nails felt their way for a moment. Then the right forefinger came to rest on a little rectangular bump.

FEET OF CLAY

"That's the Château," said the Marquis.

His finger slowly crossed the park, followed a groove, the Paris road, moved over the woods and stopped at a clearing.

"Good, here we are at Chêne-Brûlé," continued the Marquis. "What then, Laverdure?"

"In accordance with Monsieur le Marquis's orders," began the huntsman, "I went to where the stag was harboured at eleven o'clock. He broke cover at once and jumped the New Ride."

The forefinger moved slightly to the right.

"The New Ride," the blind man repeated for his own benefit.

"Then the Ladies' Ride, where the Captain told me which way he'd gone, which was most useful," said Laverdure, turning to the officer. "I could see at once that the Captain knows what he's about in the hunting field," he added, wishing to please. "A great black-horned twelve-pointer, as best I could judge. I blew the 'gone away'."

"What Captain?" interrupted the Marquis.

"Captain De Voos, Uncle; he's here," Jacqueline intervened.

"What, the one who was here a little while ago? Good, go on, Laverdure."

The old man's expression was excited; mounting blood had turned his face red, flowing into the wrinkles, the pockets, the ravines, the brown blotches, the sinuous and projecting arteries; his nostrils were quivering with scents he alone could smell, mushrooms and moss, loam and horses' sweat.

Urbain de La Monnerie was enjoying one of the only two hours in the week, between autumn and the end of April, that still made him feel he was alive. After that came the hollow months, "which the idiots call the holiday season," during which he would doze within his dead pearl, awaiting the opening meets of next October. If, between now and then . . .

His hand had begun moving again, following the hunt as the huntsman related it. The blind man spared them nothing. He was pressing this last fruit of winter, with its taste of woodsmoke, to the very pulp. It was all that life had left him.

He wanted to know which hound had found the line after the check in the field beyond Neufosse Wood, how far ahead of the pack the stag was running, whether Laverdure had got a view of it, and whether the slot was already splayed like a hunted stag's.

Whether the stag were running or doubling, the Marquis was in full cry behind it. By means of his hands and fingers he crossed thousands of acres of country. His quivering fingertips moved down into valleys, leapt hills and transmitted to him the silent surface of a green ride, the flying countryside beneath a horse's galloping hooves, the splash at a stream's ford. He heard the music of his hounds; rising slightly in his stirrups, he seized his horn to sound the "gone away" or the drawing

THE BLIND MAN'S HUNT

of a new covert, and the notes floated on the air behind him like golden pennants . . . He felt too hot and wanted his handkerchief to mop his neck.

Old Florent had managed to stay in the room by putting a fresh log on the fire and clearing away the teacups, making as little noise as possible and trying not to wheeze. He was listening to the story of the hunt with almost as much excitement as his master.

Laverdure had talked for some time, for it had not been an easy hunt.

"And then, Monsieur le Marquis," he concluded, scratching the hair at the back of his head, "that's where I must admit I made a mistake. I found my stag's line again after Combe-aux-Loups, where I saw Madame la Baronne for the last time—after all the other gentlemen had lost the hunt, I must say. Then I said to myself, 'That stag's looking for water, and that's a fact.' Well, as to the water in those parts, as Monsieur knows, and what's more he can see it very well with his fingers, there's only the Fongrelle lake and the stream running into it. Then, the hounds being tired, and the day drawing in, and what with Jolibois" (this was the second huntsman's nickname) "having gone off on some line of his own so that I hadn't seen him for the last half-hour, I cut off to the right to wait for my stag at the lake. But he never came there."

"Well, he made a fool of you, Laverdure," said the blind man.

"Well, yes, he did, Monsieur le Marquis!"

"You managed the whole of the last part of the hunt like an old huntsman, trying to use your head instead of your horse's legs."

"Yes, 'fraid I did."

Laverdure bit his lip, looking chagrined and holding in his anger. He knew that he had done as he had so as to avoid jumping some wide ditches for the second time and crossing a difficult piece of wooded country. In his prime he had never considered his own fatigue; indeed he had hardly felt it.

De Voos, in his red jacket, looked with growing sympathy at this intelligent man, whose bearing—and this is rare—was at once so easy and so respectful, and whose business in life, suffering as he was from a feeling of advancing age, was to hunt stags to the satisfaction of a blind man.

De Voos now began to understand why Jacqueline, as they were hacking home, had said: "Laverdure is a splendid man."

The old man's hands had fallen still.

"As Monsieur le Marquis can imagine," Laverdure went on, "I made a circle round the lake, cast in every direction, and moved up the stream. My hounds followed the line as far as here—Monsieur le Marquis permits?"

Laverdure gently took the blind man's forefinger in his hard reddened hand and moved it forward to the bank of the stream.

"From which direction was the wind blowing?" asked the blind man.
"Straight out of the west, Monsieur le Marquis."

The forefinger moved eastward, going up the stream towards its source and came to rest at a bend. The Marquis's expression was like that of a water-diviner who feels his twig bending.

"Well, that's where your stag is, Laverdure," he said. "He followed the stream to conceal his tracks and moved down wind so that it blew his scent forward of him, instead of carrying it back to the hounds. And since a stag that has been hunted for more than five hours and then takes to the water cannot leave it again, you know as well as I do that that's where he must be, lying close in a bed of reeds no doubt."

"But, Monsieur le Marquis, it's impossible; there's an irrigation-sluiice blocking the stream; he couldn't have passed it. He must have taken to dry land again. And casting up both banks hounds never found the line. It's almost like witchcraft."

"You can say what you like, Laverdure. Somehow or other, I tell you, your stag's there," the old man repeated. "I'm sure of it! When my father was alive and I was a boy, in the days when stags used to run towards Combe-aux-Loups more often than they do now, I can remember taking many a stag at that spot."

Laverdure thought for a moment, sighing deeply.

"Well, in that case," he said, "if Monsieur le Marquis permits, I'll just have something to eat, put a few of the freshest hounds in the van and go back there. It mustn't be said we didn't do everything possible to take it."

The blind man leaned back in his chair. He signed for his hunting-box to be removed.

He was tired; his face suddenly looked sunken, and Jacqueline felt a constriction at the heart.

When the huntsman and the butler had left them, the blind man, whose face had taken on a better colour, suddenly asked: "And where's Gilon?"

"I think, Monsieur," replied De Voos, "that he must have gone straight home to Montpréty, and I must get back there myself."

"How unfortunate," said the Marquis. "I very much dislike asking servants to make a special effort without someone in authority being present. If I could only see . . ."

"But I'll go with Laverdure, Uncle, of course," cried Jacqueline.

"No, no, don't talk nonsense. You're tired."

"Not any more, Uncle, I promise you; I could start a day's hunting all over again."

She was speaking the truth. The hope of taking the stag had renewed her strength, and De Voos looked at her in astonishment.

"I've got my car here, if you like," he said. "I'd like to see the business through."

THE BLIND MAN'S HUNT

Jacqueline didn't hesitate or make a pretence of polite refusal.

"That's very kind of you," she replied.

She was already thinking impatiently of the bend in the stream.

"You really are going, are you?" asked the Marquis.

"Of course, Uncle, I've told you so!"

The blind man's face looked happy and relieved.

"So I'm not being left to die quite alone," he murmured.

III

Through the bars of the rear doors of the ancient van they could see the hounds swaying to the bumps, evidently surprised by their night journey; the big yellow Voisin, driven by De Voos, followed behind, and the dipped headlights shone strangely gold in the hounds' eyes, as if they were Mycenaean divinities come alive within their temple.

Jacqueline managed to decipher the owner's name on the little silver plate, decorated with a medallion of Saint Christopher:

Mademoiselle Sylvaine Dual, dramatic artiste, 33 Rue de Naples.

Although she could not associate the name with anything in particular, Jacqueline felt that it had a familiar and not altogether agreeable ring.

She felt an increased interest in and a certain distrust for De Voos.

He was undoubtedly very good-looking. The dashboard-light lit up the lower part of his face. Jacqueline, almost unconsciously, gazed at the varying planes of his profile, his stubborn, determined jaw, the air of superiority, of self-assurance that was stamped on every feature, showing in every detail, in the carriage of the head, the curve of the eyelid, the formation of the muscles.

"You've got a lovely car," she said.

"Yes, it belongs to a friend of mine; she lent it me," he replied. "And does your uncle," he went on, changing the subject, "always wear those clothes on hunting days just to stay by the fire?"

"Yes, and he never has himself undressed till hounds have come home and the huntsman has made his report," said Jacqueline.

De Voos was silent for some seconds.

"When one's old, it must be a great joy still to have a passion in life."

"Have you one you think you'll keep?" she asked.

He did not answer. As he drove, he took the thick chamois glove from his right hand, a big, long, neat hand, with square well-kept nails, rather too well-kept for a soldier's. He took a gold cigarette-case from his pocket and handed it to Jacqueline. For a moment their eyes met. The big Spahi's eyes were not so much bright as glittering, their large irises the colour of a wild animal's. He smiled. Jacqueline felt slightly embarrassed.

She was wrapped in a big fur-lined coat. She was jammed between the sides of the leather seat and De Voos, who had politely tucked his burnous about her knees.

"Why do I feel this antipathy towards him?" Jacqueline wondered. "He's well-mannered and kind; he's taken no advantage of the fact that we're alone to force his advances on me, as so many men would feel obliged to do."

Was it the hand on the steering-wheel, the thick gold chain he wore round his wrist, the military cap at such an insolent angle across his forehead, the row of decorations, unchallengeable of course, but a little too ostentatious—the ribbon with the rosette of an officer of the Legion of Honour and the four palms on the Croix de Guerre: were they not enough, why did he have to wear all the rest? Or was it this too-luxurious car that didn't belong to him which gave Jacqueline the impression that her companion was not pure gold, was not, as they said in La Monnerie circles, "altogether desirable"?

"You don't live at Mauglaives all the time?" he asked.

"No. I divide my time between Paris, where my children are at school, and here," Jacqueline replied. "And what's more, it's only this year, for the first season since my husband's death, that I've begun hunting again."

As always, when she remembered François Schoudler, whose suicide had taken place about six years ago, or when he was mentioned in her presence, Jacqueline had a moment of recoil, of inner tension, and her eyebrows became even more arched than usual.

Then she said: "You would have liked each other, I'm sure of it."

She wondered why she had found it necessary to say that last sentence which was not altogether in keeping with her thoughts, and then felt annoyed at having done so.

"I have often heard Gilon speak of him as a very exceptional man," said De Voos.

Jacqueline made no reply. The cars turned into a side-road, whose yellow surface was broken by ruts. The hounds' eyes were still glowing behind the bars.

"Besides," he went on, "that great barracks of a place through the year would be pretty depressing for a woman all alone."

What most embarrassed Jacqueline about him, and at the same time attracted her, was his air of authority, the ease with which he seemed to take charge of other people's lives, the impression he gave all the time of saying: "You'll see, now that I'm here everything will be all right."

Already he was calling Mauglaives, which he had never seen before, "that great barracks," as if he knew it well. It was exactly the expression that François had used about it in the old days.

Jacqueline felt she must take care not to utter words in this man's

presence that might be interpreted as meaning more than the intention behind them.

"Everyone's so determined to make me marry again," she thought. "Mother produces an eligible man every month, my father-in-law wants me to marry Simon Lachaume, and Uncle Urbain, who had that fellow Gilon in mind, is now beginning all over again with the first visitor who happens to come to the house! I sense the same feeling among the servants. Why should they be so concerned at my remaining a widow?"

Then the soldier said: "We shall find the stag again all right. Your uncle's absolutely right. It was going upstream."

And even in this matter his voice seemed to manifest certainty and competence.

The cars had come to the end of the passable track, and Laverdure let the hounds out.

IV

January that year was exceptionally mild. The land was spongy from the recent thaw, and the sky a dark, sooty roof overhead.

Laverdure was holding up a great straw torch as he waded upstream in his boots. Charlemagne, the young kennel-man—a charity boy whose Christian name had seemed sufficiently odd not to make it worthwhile giving him a nickname straightaway: "If he deserves it," said Laverdure, "we'll call him La Ramée"—Charlemagne was following them half-asleep, also carrying a straw torch and an armful of twisted wisps of straw ready prepared. Two of the boldest hounds were floundering along behind them. Four others, of which one was old Valençay, were following along the bank.

Laverdure, in his throaty huntsman's voice, was ceaselessly cheering his hounds on in an apparently hopeless search.

"Hark in! Hark in! Seek him out! Get along in!"

"If we take this stag it will have some special significance," thought Jacqueline, though she could not define what that significance would be for her. In spite of her furs she felt cold and every now and then she shivered.

Laverdure had been working for a quarter of an hour without result. The old irrigation-sluice he had mentioned to the Marquis was in front of them, barring their way with its slippery, moss-covered planks, and its eddy of dirty foam.

"All the same he must have gone somewhere. It's a proper poser," the huntsman grumbled.

Suddenly he had an idea and called: "Charlemagne! Here, catch this!"

He took off his hunting-knife, his belt and coat, and threw them to the kennelman.

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"What are you doing, Laverdure?" cried Jacqueline.

"Don't worry, Madame la Baronne," he replied.

And, half-kneeling, crawling along level with the water, twisting this way and that, clinging to a worm-eaten beam with one hand, while the other held the torch, the old huntsman crept through the narrow opening of the sluice, under the raised panel as if under the guillotine.

"It's not possible; you wouldn't believe it," thought Jacqueline. And almost at the same moment she heard Laverdure mutter: "Good God! Well, I'm damned! What an extraordinary thing!"

Then he suddenly stood up straight and shouted: "Valençay! Get along in there! Charlemagne! Wake up, get a move on! Put the hound in the water! There he is. Hark in! Get along in!"

As he stood, square and stocky in his black-and-gold waistcoat, struggling in the turbulent stream, his breeches soaked and a torch in his hand, the old man was happy, beautiful and almost terrifying.

He had seen two fresh slots left by the stag in the moss which carpeted the top of the sluice.

"Oh, Madame la Baronne!" he cried. "Who would have thought that a stag, particularly so big a one, could have got through here? What cunning! I hope Madame will excuse my swearing, but there's good reason for it! Get along in! Hark in, my beauties!"

"Bravo, Laverdure! We shall take him!" cried Jacqueline.

"It may well be, Madame la Baronne, it may well be."

The scent of the tired hunted stag must still have been strong about the slots on the planking, for Valençay gave tongue twice. And the five other hounds, half-paddling, half-swimming, followed him under the sluice.

Laverdure had regained the bank and put on his coat. He had seized a long stick and was beating the water, making as much noise as possible.

Suddenly, at the point in the bend which the Marquis had indicated, the six hounds gave tongue and a black shape bounded in the stream with a huge splash and then jumped out on to the bank.

"Gone away! Gone away!" cried Jacqueline.

"I told you so!" replied De Voos.

Jacqueline looked at him gratefully and trustfully, as if he had really had something to do with it. Then they began running, stumbling among the willow-roots and in the clayey earth.

"To his head, to his head!" cried Laverdure, cheering on his hounds.

The stag, though chilled by the water, had nevertheless had time to recover to some extent. He began running ahead of the hounds and there was danger of losing him again in the dark.

"It's a miracle even to have started him again," thought Jacqueline.

And indeed the stag ran straight ahead, his dark shape seeming to fly over the ground. But instead of disappearing into the undergrowth, he ran straight into a tree.

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They heard the dull thud. The stag stood for a moment stunned; then started off again, but turned in a circle, and banged his horns in a demented way, as if charging an army of giants; then, blown, he backed against the trunk of a tree and faced the hounds.

The men arrived with their torches. The old stag had assumed a magnificent pose, back to the night, his dark skin smooth from the water, his huge chest rising and falling with every rapid breath, and his great head held high as he tossed it angrily with the pain of the blow.

The six hounds, their heads raised, encircled him with those deep, guttural, savage cries that are heard only when a stag is at bay.

"Why does he bang into trees like that, Laverdure?" asked Jacqueline.

"He's blind, Madame la Baronne," replied the huntsman, taking off his cap. "Look, Madame can see for herself!"

He went forward to within prudent distance of the stag and waved his torch. The stag breathed in the smoke but did not move; his glassy eyes remained wide open, shining with a red glow that was only the reflection of the flame.

"It happens, Madame la Baronne," said Laverdure, "it happens sometimes with a hard-run stag. Something bursts in their heads, and then they can no longer see. The stag would die tomorrow anyway or the day after . . . Yes, I know it seems funny . . ." he added, realizing of whom Jacqueline and De Voos were thinking.

He stamped on the butt of his torch, drew his hunting-knife and said deferentially: "I do not suppose that Madame la Baronne wishes to dispatch him . . ."

Jacqueline shook her head and looked at De Voos.

Laverdure hesitated for a moment, then added: "Unless Madame la Baronne wishes to give the Captain the honour . . ."

According to immemorial usage—and no one had more respect for it than Laverdure—a stag must be served by a master or, lacking one, a huntsman, but never by a guest.

It was only the circumstances of this exceptional hunt that could allow of an infringement of the rules; above all, it required the existence between Jacqueline and De Voos of some secret relationship of which they were not themselves aware, but which induced the old huntsman to act as he did, as if he wished to place them in a situation that was equally flattering to both of them.

"Will you?" said Jacqueline.

"With pleasure," replied De Voos, taking the knife which was as long as a bayonet.

While these courtesies were being exchanged, the old stag felt that death was approaching.

De Voos had let his burnous fall to the ground so as to free his arm.

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The stag, his head held high, was as tall as he was; but De Voos's excitement was diminished by the fact that the stag was blind; he felt he would rather have killed a man.

"Take care, Monsieur! Even though he's blind, he can still defend himself," said Laverdure. "You must take him in the flank, and press the knife here, behind the shoulder" (he pointed to the place on his own coat with his thumb), "find the soft spot, and then drive it home . . ."

"Yes, yes . . ." said De Voos.

"Charlemagne, light another torch, and get a stick to throw in his horns, if need be."

The hounds had ceased to give tongue; they were waiting, teeth gleaming, hackles raised.

Jacqueline thought of François, as he used to jump from his horse when a stag was at bay and walk forward as De Voos was doing at this moment; and she felt the same fear mingled with pride.

The stag, scenting the man's approach, lowered his enormous head, snuffed at the earth and gathered himself as if to spring.

"In the flank, Monsieur, in the flank!" cried Laverdure, stepping forward.

There was a horrible howl. The stag had raised his head, and in his horns was a twisting mass that fell to the ground in front of him.

"God, the bastard!" cried Laverdure. "Be quick, Monsieur!"

One of the hounds was lying on the ground, his paws waving in the air, his entrails oozing from his stomach.

De Voos attacked the stag, felt the resistance of bone under the knife, moved the point, and thrust home with all the strength of his shoulder, almost losing his balance so easily did the blade sink in to the hilt. He had not expected so strong an animal to have such soft flesh. The old stag fell to his knees, then on to his right side, with a faint belling; the blood flowed from his open mouth, over his tongue.

Jacqueline drew a deep breath, which she had forgotten to do for several seconds.

"I'm terribly sorry about the hound. I wasn't quick enough, was I?" asked De Voos, very much in control of himself, as he handed the knife back to the huntsman.

"Oh no, Monsieur! It can happen to anyone," replied Laverdure rather curtly. "On the contrary, Monsieur showed great determination."

He raised his cap again. The gesture was a completely automatic reflex action when anyone spoke to him, on horseback or on foot, as long as he had a free hand.

He wiped the knife on the coat of the eviscerated hound, which was still quivering slightly in a pool of blood, and rubbed its back with his huge, wet boot, saying: "Poor Artaban, well it was your turn. It

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always happens to the best. Better that it should be you than the Captain, eh?"

It was only then that he felt the damp and cold of his body. "Bad for the rheumatics," he thought, "if it doesn't lead to something worse. I shall be in trouble with Léontine when she sees me come home like this." He suddenly felt disgusted with everything, but there was no one he could take it out on. "Perhaps if I had dispatched him myself, or if Charlemagne had thrown his stick at him... But there, there... That's what happens."

Old Valençay, his lips drawn back, was already making his cautious way towards the spilt entrails of the other hound. Laverdure chased him violently away, shouting: "Back there! You shan't be fleshed on that."

He took from his pocket a clasp-knife, smaller than the other and with a sharp blade; going to the body of the stag, he slit it open from the ribs to the genitals with a single blow. A hot stench of venison spread over the copse.

There was no question of ceremonial at this time of night, merely of rewarding the hounds as quickly as possible.

"Tear him and eat him! Tear him and eat him!" cried Laverdure with a wave of his arm.

The five hounds leapt on to the entrails, sinking their heads in them to the breast with a great champing of teeth, growling, their hackles up.

Hearing his comrades feasting, Artaban opened his eyes and with an expression at once sorrowful and hungry, made a supreme effort to drag himself to the feast; then his head fell back on the ground and he moved no more.

The others continued to tear at the gristle, fighting over the ruminant's four stomachs filled with nauseous herbage and secret liquors, disputing each other's possession of the long gleaming entrails, their fangs tearing at the opal, the ruby and the brilliant blue.

Jacqueline gazed at the details of this spectacle with a mixture of disgust and excitement.

"Is it the first stag you've dispatched?" she asked.

"Yes, the first," replied De Voos, smiling.

No hunt had ever before given Jacqueline this feeling of dominating, not only the things that could be bought with money, the hounds and the men, but all else, the sky, the plain, the forest and the wild animals that lived in it, as had this hunt by night and this savage death by the light of the burning straw.

"What did I tell Madame la Baronne? A fourteen-pointer," declared Laverdure, expressing in his own way an identical feeling of pride. "You don't see one every day in these parts. Monsieur le Marquis will be pleased."

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In a few minutes the hounds had emptied, torn apart and devoured the huge mass of entrails, and the great stag was as hollow as an old stranded frigate.

The last torch went out in the young kennelman's hand.

The following morning, before leaving Montprély, where he was the guest of Commandant Gilon, Gabriel De Voos received from Laverdure, who arrived in his ordinary working clothes, the right slot of the stag with the fresh soft skin braided into a thong. A card, engraved with the name of the Baronne François Schoudler, accompanied it, with a few words written in a thin rapid hand:

"From my uncle. You've well deserved it! Come back and hunt whenever you like."

V

The two parts of the lock on the gate no longer met; a chain hung down with a big padlock which was used to close it at night. The yard was littered with old barrow-wheels, garden-tools, and agricultural implements which were no longer in use. The stable was empty. A little trickle of liquid manure still ran from the cowshed where there was still one cow. Behind an old wire fence chickens paddled foot-deep among their own droppings.

Simon Lachaume had not returned to Mureaux for his father's death.

His last visit had been more than ten years ago, and had then been for only a few hours, during the course of one of his leaves towards the end of the war.

In front of the house in which he had been born, and which aroused in him none but wretched, despicable memories, he was suddenly seized with a sort of fugitive nostalgia, at once ridiculous and inexplicable.

Everything was worn, rusted, rotted by age and rain. The shutters had come loose from their hinges, the plaster on the walls was falling away in great flakes, revealing the powdered mortar; the roofs were decrepit and Simon walked forward over fallen tiles which cracked beneath his feet like sugar.

Old Mother Lachaume was working in the garden, bent towards the earth. Simon at first saw only the old woman's huge black behind.

"Mother!" he called.

She turned her head, came slowly and painfully erect, and watched her son come towards her between two lines of dead espalier apple-trees.

"Oh, it's you," she said, showing no other sign of surprise. "If you had not said 'Mother' I don't think I should have recognized you. You've not got much hair left now, and you're fatter and dressed like a proper gentleman."

Simon automatically passed his hand over his bald head on which there remained only a short chestnut tuft in the centre.

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Mother and son did not embrace. For a few moments longer they studied each other, observing the changes that had taken place in them.

Mother Lachaume had not altered much. She was still the same monstrous mass of unwieldy, deformed flesh. Only her right eyelid had fallen, thick as a nutshell, and her cheeks had become covered with a grey stubble, while between the wisps of her hair, drawn back into a bun, her scalp showed in wide pink lines.

She wiped her hands on her sides and said, eventually: "If you've bothered to come it must be because you've got something to discuss with me. Let's go into the house."

Old as she was, she had not shrunk and was still taller than her son by half a head. They walked side by side down the weedy path, feeling like strangers to each other; and yet they were not unlike. Both had little hair on their heads, both had the same sort of balanced gait from the hips, and while she carried before her her tumour and her dropsy beneath the dirty apron, he bore the growing stomach of his too-well-nourished forty years.

Simon looked about him at the land which had half gone to waste; the emotion he had felt at the first sight of it had already disappeared. The old woman walked on, immured in her distrust, apparently paying no attention to anything. She dropped her clogs on the threshold of the kitchen.

In the big dark room Simon was immediately assailed by the smell of sour wine and milk, smoke and greasy water, which had enveloped his whole childhood, the smell which his mother seemed to carry about with her and which impregnated everything, furniture, fabrics, food and memory. All that was lacking was the acrid smell of sweat that had been his father's contribution.

And Simon's eyes turned immediately to the alcove between the hearth and the bread-bin, certain of finding there the most painful sight of his home-coming.

Crouching rather than sitting on an old low chair that had lost most of its straw, Simon's brother was blowing vaguely at a primitive wind-mill made out of two bits of crossed cardboard on the end of an elder-twig.

"Come, Louis, come and say how-do-you-do," said Mother Lachaume. "Come on, don't be afraid; it's Simon."

The figure that rose awkwardly to its feet, leaning on the bread-bin, was dressed in short trousers and a black apron. He came forward like an ill-controlled puppet, throwing his lanky legs sideways, his hands turned outwards. He was taller than Simon. The skin of his face, his twisted hands and his knobbly knees, was the same colour all over, a sort of cold greenish-bronze. The exaggeratedly oval face, framed by two lanky locks issuing from under a *béret*, was entirely unlined. The

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lower lip hung down, shiny with saliva. The dark, deep, velvety eyes squinted horribly.

The idiot murmured: "... doo," sucked in his spittle and went back to his corner, where he sat on the bin, his legs hanging.

"He's very well, you see. He's behaving very nicely just now," said the old woman.

Simon sat down. The chair was so dusty that he instinctively made the peasant gesture of tucking up his coat.

"How old is he now?" he asked.

"Well, that's not difficult to work out," replied Mother Lachaume. "He's three years older than you are. That makes him forty-four."

The idiot, having thrown his windmill on the floor, took up a school-boy's slate and began making incomprehensible signs on it with a squeaky pencil.

"At bottom," said Mother Lachaume, "he's like you. If he could have done it, he'd have liked studying."

There was a moment's silence.

"You'll take a drop," she said, going to the sideboard for a bottle. She offered him a drink as if he were a stranger and, like a stranger, he did not dare refuse the little glass of rough brandy; he did not want to vex her.

"It's good," he said.

"It's the one your father liked," she replied. "Oh, well! Everyone has his own vice. Now that he's no longer here he doesn't make me suffer any more."

She sat down and fell silent, gazing at Simon from beneath her eyelid that looked like half a nut.

"Did you get the money last month?" he asked, trying to get the conversation going.

He regularly sent his mother a postal-order for three hundred francs, of which in fact she stood in no need. In her miserliness she put the three monthly notes away in an old biscuit-box, where they gradually piled up.

"Yes, yes," she replied. "Thanks. Oh, as far as that goes, I can't complain of you. It's not like it used to be. I was saying to mother Feudechien only the other day. 'It's very satisfactory. My son does not leave me in poverty. He's grateful for all that's been done for him.'"

It was only now that Mother Lachaume seemed to be moved at seeing her son again. A sort of white froth appeared at the corners of her eyelids; she pulled up her skirt, and searched the pocket of her violet petticoat, which was stiff with dirt, for a handkerchief with which she dabbed at her eyes.

"Well . . . you've come anyway . . . you've come anyway . . ." she said over and over again, sighing deeply.

"I'm appearing before the Election Committee," said Simon.

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“Does that mean you’re going to be a deputy?” asked the old woman, leaving off rubbing her eyes.

“I think so. I hope so.”

“If there have to be idlers like that, it might as well be you as anyone else.”

Simon tried to explain to her why he wanted to stand for a constituency of the department in which he had been born and what chances he had. He found simple words to express the culmination of several years of cunning perseverance, and so many useful luncheons, so many carefully made contacts and so many clever flatteries, indeed so many mornings spent, pencil in hand, over the grids and stippling, the hatching and shading that went to make up the electoral map of France.

Now everything was settled; Simon had his support, his funds, his agents and his newspapers.

Mother Lachaume, suspicious again, her eyelid motionless, listened without apparent understanding. That her son should have become so important a man, that he should dine with Ministers and Prime Ministers, affected her not at all. It all took place in a world that was for her as remote as the Indies, and to which no recital could give her access. She thought that the President of the Republic was still Émile Loubet.

“But hasn’t his son succeeded him?”

Then, suddenly, looking at the lapel of Simon’s coat she asked: “What about your Legion of Honour, does it bring you in any money?”

“No,” said Simon.

“That’s funny. Because the new schoolmaster, whom you don’t know, he’s got a medal that brings him in something.”

Simon felt he was wasting time. The idiot was still making an irritating squeaking on his slate.

“I’ve taken a house at Jeumont, you know, The Cardinal’s House,” said Simon.

“If you’ve done that it must be because you like it.”

“No. It’s not that; it’s because I need it.”

“It’ll cost you a good deal of money; you’d have done better to take a new house rather than an old one like that.”

The “old one” to which Mother Lachaume referred was a few kilometres away in the next parish. It was a composite structure, its centre being a big square building with a tiled roof, the remains of an ancient rectory, which had been flanked in the eighteenth century by a fine wing of white stone. It had ten rooms. There was an avenue of limes, two hundred years old, and a big field, half-flooded in the winter, which ran down to the river. A house which, if it had not been in the town and had not belonged merely to a retired officer, might have been called “the little château.”

It was large enough to give the candidate a certain standing but not sufficiently big to look ostentatious. And then, above all, it would eclipse the Mureaux house.

"There seems to me no point in our having two houses," said Simon. "So the best thing would be for you to come and live with me and sell this one."

Mother Lachaume sat up a little in her chair, gazing fixedly at her son from eyes which lacked all lashes, one round like that of a night-bird, the other half-closed.

"Oh, that's what you came for . . ." she murmured.

There was a moment's silence.

"No," she went on. "I won't live in anyone else's house."

"But, Mother, I'm not anyone else!"

"I know what I'm talking about. In the first place, there'll be your wife."

"But no, Mother. You know that I've been living apart from Yvonne for years. We don't live together in Paris. I never see her."

"Well then, I wonder why you married her," said the old woman.

Simon shrugged his shoulders and thought: "Now it's going to begin all over again."

"Besides, this belongs to me," she went on. "I won't live in a house that's on lease."

Simon explained that he had had the lease drawn up with an option to buy. If he were elected, he would buy the house.

"And if you're not elected?"

"Well, I shall continue to lease it until . . ."

He was going to say "until your death"; he stopped, but she had understood.

"Why don't you let me die here?" she said. "The cemetery's next door. You won't have to wait long for me to go there. Besides, I don't like Jeumont . . . No, my boy, no," she went on, "you don't move an old woman of my age. Besides, there are stairs in The Cardinal's House. I can't manage them because of my varicose veins. Here, take a look!"

She raised her skirt and petticoat, displaying enormous legs with such lumps on them that it looked as though she had slipped a dozen eggs between the flesh and the black cotton stockings.

"They even suppurate some days," she declared with a sort of pride.

"No, my boy, no, old people are not meant to live with young ones. You'll have to entertain a lot of people and I shall do you no honour."

"You'll embarrass me a great deal more by staying here," thought Simon.

He had a few weeks only in which to elaborate his new personality, to play "the son of the people," the child of a labouring family who had risen by his own merit and did honour to the department.

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To achieve this, the memory of his drunken father had to be suppressed, his mother must be installed in semi-bourgeois dignity, and the idiot brother disposed of.

Simon knew that a successful man's present always gets the better of his past, and that success can even obliterate crime. He only needed a little cleverness, combined with self-assurance, to avoid having to listen at some public meeting to such cries as: "You weren't so proud when your father was found sitting in the pond!" And in place of it to have old peasants, half-bantering, half-sentimental, coming to him saying: "Ah, Monsieur Lachaume. He was a great card, your father was; we had many a drop too much together, he and I, on market days!" and taking pride in their old friendship.

Of the idiot people would say in whispers: "That's a misfortune that can happen in any family..." Until the day when they would speak of him no longer.

"Besides, your poor brother is all right here. He might not be happy if her was moved," said Mother Lachaume.

"Precisely, as for Louis..."

Simon looked towards the end of the room; the idiot had now curled up, his knees raised, his chin resting on the cold earthenware, and, like an animal who feels that misfortune is approaching, his squinting eyes were fixed on the visitor.

Simon instinctively lowered his voice though his brother could not understand what he said.

"The best thing for him, and for everyone else, I think, would be to put him in an asylum... Not as a pauper, of course," Simon added hastily. "I'll pay an annuity so that he can have all he needs and you'll be able to go and see him whenever you like. It'll relieve you of the trouble he gives you..."

Mother Lachaume's face took on such a terrifying expression, such a fire flashed from her round eyes, that Simon fell silent.

"So that's it! So that's it! Yes, of course, of course..." cried the old woman. "So you want to put your brother in an asylum now, do you? That's what you've decided, is it? I'd rather strangle him, do you hear, strangle him with my own hands, than have it said I allowed my child to be put in an asylum! Isn't it enough that I've borne the cross of his condition without his being taken from me now that I'm all alone? So that's it..."

She fumbled for her snuff-taker's handkerchief and automatically wiped her eyes, though she was not weeping...

"So that's all you've got to say by way of thanks?" she went on. "After everything we did for you, allowing you to study at an age when other boys begin work so that your father had to have a hired hand in your place, poor as he was. So you're ashamed of us, are you, ashamed of us? I'll go and tell them, I will, I'll tell them! 'He's a

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fine deputy you've got!' I'll say. 'Just look at him! He throws his mother into the street and his brother into the asylum!' And then I'll have posters put up, so that people can read what you're really like!"

She was shouting, spitting her saliva out before her, sitting with her hands on her hips and her huge drooping breasts rising and falling as she gasped for breath.

Simon gazed with hatred on this mass of used, fatty cells, from which nothing could come now but pus from ulcers, wax from ears, tears from eyes, but which managed yet to be an obstacle to his will. That this mass of flesh, already half-corrupted, should once have borne him, created no more links of affection between the old woman and himself than there is between a tree and the mould in which it germinates.

"That's enough, now you listen to me," cried Simon, angry in his turn, as he banged on the dirty table with the palm of his hand.

At this moment there came a sort of gargling from the end of the kitchen. It was the idiot laughing at the argument. In his delight he let go of the slate which broke noisily on the stone floor. He immediately began to cry.

Mother Lachaume angrily went and picked up the pieces of slate and then came back and held them under Simon's eyes, shouting: "Here, look! Look what you've gone and done!"

Simon shrugged his shoulders.

"All right, I'll buy him another," he said.

And suddenly he felt utterly disgusted. Why had he not sought election in another constituency, no matter where, so long as it was at the other end of France?

For a moment he despaired. Not that he feared Mother Lachaume's threats; but the weed-filled garden, the smoky kitchen, the idiot at whose face the old woman was dabbing, all reminded Simon of everything he wanted to forget, destroyed the confidence he had in himself.

It was impossible to build a great career on so wretched a foundation. None of the qualities that had gone to his success was innate. Everything that had enabled him to rise had been learned from schoolmasters, patrons and women. Heredity had given him nothing but tenacity, cunning and egotism.

Would this precarious, this over-flexible scaffolding, confected of none but stolen materials, be strong enough to carry him higher, or would it collapse the first time circumstances demanded something from Simon other than mere personal advancement?

"I'd rather have been a charity child," he said heavily. "It would have made little material difference, and at least I could always have believed that I had other parents than these."

As he said this, he recollected the dream he had cherished between the ages of six and twelve, that one day he would discover that he had been a foundling.

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"I should certainly have done better to have put you in an institution," cried Mother Lachaume. "It would have saved me a great deal of misery . . . Marie Feudechien doesn't know how lucky she is to have lost her son in the war! And now, listen to me," she went on, putting her arms round the idiot, "we shan't be put out of here till I'm dead, and that won't be long, you may be sure."

"Don't let's count our chickens," muttered Simon.

"As for you, you can get out of that door," replied the old woman.

Simon got up, took off his spectacles, passed his hand over his snub-nosed face, and then replaced the glasses when he had wiped them with his thumbs.

The old woman thought she had checkmated him.

"Very well," he said calmly. "You've forgotten that I have never claimed the part of the inheritance due to me from my father. Since you're being so stubborn about it, I shall demand the sale of the house. Everything will be put up to auction and you can then do as you like."

"You'd do that?" murmured Mother Lachaume.

"The law's on my side," said Simon.

She very nearly replied that in that case the law was directed against honest people; but the blow was too hard, and she saw that Simon had the whip-hand.

She sat down, tossing her head in silence. Simon gave her plenty of time to grasp the fact of her defeat, then, putting his hand on her shoulder, he said gently: "Very well, Mother, I'll come back next week. You'll see, you'll be much happier at Jeumont."

"Perhaps I'll be lucky enough to die before I have to move," thought Mother Lachaume when her son had left.

She sat there a long time without moving, then she went painfully to get a tub, pulled it in front of the stove and filled it with hot water.

"Come on, Louis," she said, "come and have your bath. It's not the right day, but it doesn't matter. Have the benefit of it, my poor boy; perhaps I shan't have the chance of bathing you often from now on."

She took the idiot's schoolboy clothes off, and helped him into the tub.

"Take care, don't upset it."

Weeping, Mother Lachaume devoted herself to the happy task of washing the forty-four-year-old idiot, who sat naked in the wooden tub, with crooked backbone, bronze-coloured skin and sterile genitals, but who yet fulfilled for her, in the most appalling and terrible way, the secret dream of every mother: that of keeping her son in a state of perpetual childhood.

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VI

The day before the date fixed for Mother Lachaume's move, the idiot was taken to the asylum in an ambulance. Simon had ordered it to make the neighbours think the wretched half-wit's condition had grown suddenly worse.

The old woman sobbed all night, hoping against hope that she might die during the few remaining hours before she would have to leave her roof. Her prayers were not granted.

In the morning she went to Communion at early Mass, then to the cemetery to place a handful of earth in a little bag she concealed in the pocket of her petticoat. Kneeling among the graves, she muttered to herself: "I shall soon be brought back here. So soon, so soon; why couldn't I have died last night?"

Almost simultaneously with the pantehnicon, Simon arrived, driving his own car.

He was calm, authoritative and in a hurry, like a magistrate detailed to attend on the morning of an execution.

"That one, that one and that one . . ." he said to the removal men, selecting the few usable pieces of furniture. And to his mother: "No, not that, Mother, leave it!"

"But it may come in useful," muttered the old woman.

He almost had to come to blows to prevent her taking a whole heap of rotten old junk, straw bottle-containers and other rubbish; she clung to everything, to the ten calendars hanging from the same nail, one on top of the other, to the three pots in the window in which the geraniums froze every winter, to the badly-broken salt-box whose position she knew so well that her hand could find it even in the dark.

She fought for every object, and over every object she was defeated.

In a few minutes now she was going to have to leave her kitchen-garden, her pig, her rusty tools, her empty stable, in which she could nevertheless still see the three horses that had succeeded each other during the course of her married life, and the trap in which she used in the past to go to market, and which now raised its shafts in prayer in the cart-shed.

She would no longer now have the anxiety, which gave her a hold on life, of the few acres of land scattered across the territory of the Commune, which she either left fallow or let on the most curious of rentals. "You will give me two hundred and fifty francs a year and a sack of oats." Then she would exchange the oats for honey. There would be no more gossip with the neighbours; the people of Jeumont did not interest her because she knew nothing about them.

Infuriated by her lamentations, Simon finally lit a great bonfire in the middle of the yard and himself threw on it everything he had refused to allow his mother to keep. With controlled anger he tore down

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the fly-blown curtains, seized armfuls of rubbish from the bottoms of cupboards, and emptied the contents of whole drawers on to the fire. The idiot's ragged chair, his poor playthings, an old cap that had belonged to Father Lachaume, and which now reassumed the shape of his head as it burnt, all these were thrown on the flames, together with dry corks, rotten string and worn-out clogs.

A thick acrid smoke rose from the squalid heap and hung over the barn, the stable and the house.

Simon, his hands black, his coat dusty (he kept saying to himself: "To think I've got to do all this myself!") watched the spectacle he had initiated with such joy as he had never known before, a violent, bitter, liberating joy. The blue flames flaring from his father's cap, the column of smoke in which the family remains were being annihilated, had the beneficent effect on Simon of symbols one creates in dreams, but a thousand times stronger, a thousand times more effective. And it seemed to him that he was living in a dream.

Mother Lachaume, her eyelid drooping even more than usual, watched the ashes fall, and repeated to herself: "Very soon now! Very soon now! You really might have waited."

She clutched the biscuit-box in which she kept her money to her breast.

When the sideboard was moved, fifty gold coins rolled out on to the floor with a sharp, joyous tinkle. Mother Lachaume, distracted by the move, which for her was the end of the world, had forgotten her hiding-place. She looked frightened and ashamed. Simon looked at her with malicious irony.

"You would have liked to find them, wouldn't you?" she cried. "But I'm not worried about them; you won't put them on the fire."

When everything had been removed and there remained on the walls nothing but spiders' webs as thick as blankets, marking the places where the furniture had been, the old woman made a tour of the three dark and shabby rooms that seemed suddenly to have grown larger. With a twig of box and a holy-water basin she had succeeded in preserving from Simon's fury she sprinkled the house as if it were a corpse.

Then she covered the pink stripes between her thin hair with a hat covered with black jet, in the shape of a crown, whose strings she tied beneath her chin. And then, at last, she said she was ready to leave. But Simon had to stop three times in the village that she might embrace Marie Feudechien, Marie Védée, and Marie Chauçon.

"You mustn't cry," said the old women. "You're lucky to be going to live in a big house like that, and to have a son with a fine car to take you there."

"Yes, yes, of course, I'm lucky," replied Mother Lachaume, compelled to agree with them out of vanity. "But it's my bed."

"How do you mean, your bed? Aren't you taking it with you?"

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"Yes, but here it was placed as it should be, facing the sepulchre of our Lord. Over there, how shall I know where the sepulchre is?"

"The Curé will tell you," replied Marie Védée.

At last Simon managed to get his mother away; she was like a huge parcel of damp linen.

Cars frightened her and this distracted her a little from her grief.

"Aren't we taking the road to Jeumont?" she asked suddenly.

"No," replied Simon, "we're going by Bourges; I want to give you a surprise."

Suspicious, she settled back in the seat, giving a start of fear every time they passed a cart.

At Bourges Simon stopped the car in front of the Nouvelles Galeries. He had decided to buy his mother a completely new outfit of clothes.

"Oh no, my boy, oh no," mumbled the old woman, "you can see for yourself I can hardly drag myself along. Besides, I need nothing. No, I can't."

But from department to department, from floor to floor, he dragged her pitilessly on, a breathless mass, as she moved between the counters like a collier between the quays of a harbour.

—He bought his mother two black dresses, a coat, a whole trousseau of thick white linen, shoes, and a huge pair of stays, hard as a breast-plate, which looked as though they were carved out of mattress-ticking.

At every new purchase Mother Lachaume collapsed on a chair and said: "But why go to all this expense? I shall never have time to use it. It'll be very soon now, it's not worth while!"

Simon could not have taken more trouble to dress a little working girl he wanted to make his mistress.

As they left the shop, he was satisfied with the old woman's new look, her dignified air of being a peasant mother who would weep for joy at her son's every success. He had made her a discreet republican Épinal picture and her presence in the house at Jeumont, instead of doing Simon a disservice, would on the contrary help him to prove that he had remained faithful to his modest origins. The public is always prepared to like a good son and it demands family virtues from those it elects.

"These stays are suffocating me," said Mother Lachaume when they reached the outskirts of Bourges.

She was purple in the face and the corset forced her to sit up straight.

"It's nothing, Mother, you'll see; you'll get accustomed to it."

The old woman did not utter another word till they reached Jeumont. As they entered the town, Simon braked suddenly.

"Ah, the first poster!" he cried.

He jumped out of the car.

The election-posters stood in line on their wooden supports, against

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the grey wall of the school. Simon's bore the number 3. "A good number," he thought. The paste, still fresh, brightened up the cheap, straw-coloured paper.

Simon had had a large reproduction of his photograph put on the poster. The thousands of little ink dots, varnished by the wet paste, showed him in three-quarter length, the tuft in the middle of his forehead, his chin held high, his authoritative, almost provocative gaze behind the glasses; it was one of those faces which may be called interestingly ugly.

He glanced quickly at his opponents' posters, but soon returned to his own with satisfaction, as if he were gazing at himself in a looking-glass. He complacently reread the legend printed in heavy type, which he knew by heart—since he had drafted it, composed it and weighed it so carefully himself—containing his personal recommendations to the electors.

SIMON LACHAUME

41 years old

CHEVALIER OF THE LEGION OF HONOUR

MASTER OF ARTS

DOCTOR OF LETTERS

SOMETIME PROFESSOR IN THE PARIS SCHOOLS

SOMETIME DEPUTY DIRECTOR OF THE OFFICE OF THE
MINISTER FOR EDUCATION

JOURNALIST

SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE "ECHO DU MATIN"

VICE-PRESIDENT OF THE PROFESSIONAL PRESS ASSOCIATION

LIEUTENANT OF THE RESERVE

EX-SERVICEMAN

It was a list of attainments calculated to impress the elector, while, more immediately, it reassured Simon. "All that is me," he said to himself. "And I have made myself by my own efforts."

He seemed to be his own begetter, to have no ancestors but the University, the antechambers of Ministers, editorial offices and board-rooms. These alone seemed to him true; while the old woman sitting in the car, imprisoned in her over-stiff stays, seemed to him unreal, non-existent, a sort of false witness to the past, or at most a mistake of the Fates in casting the dice. "I suppose I had to be born somewhere..."

"I don't feel very well," said Mother Lachaume softly as Simon got back into the car. "I feel as if something had burst in my head."

It was only then that Simon bothered to look at the old woman with some attention. The eye with the drooping lid had turned the colour

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of wine-dregs and across half of her forehead on the same side had appeared suddenly a close, thick network of violet veins, as if the veins of a leaf, stripped by autumn, had suddenly become stuck there.

"It can't be helped," thought Simon, "it was bound to be she or I!"

VII

Commandant Gilon, his hat on his knees, his fat thighs crossed over the edge of a too-low chair upholstered in white satin, followed Sylvaine Dual with unhappy eyes as she moved about the room.

Honorary Squadron Commander, ex-Dragoon and *aide-de-camp* to General de La Monnerie, he had left the army soon after the retirement of his chief and had settled in his manor house of Montpréty, where his happiest times were spent hunting with the Mauglaives pack. Charles Gilon was one of those bachelors who grow old before their time, whose selfishness is the basis of their character, but whom idleness, vanity, the need to be "in the swim," a taste for patronage and a delight in recounting the ingratitude of people to whom they have rendered services, continually impel to interfere in the complications of other people's lives. These are the people who are generally seconds in duels, and who are always given the duty of announcing deaths and the breaking off of love-affairs.

Sylvaine Dual, her bare arms emerging from a green silk dressing-gown with an angry gesture, cried, "Oh, yes, that's simply splendid!" She clapped her hands to her forehead. "The great warrior hasn't even the courage to come himself!"

She laughed contemptuously and went on striding up and down the room, between the window and the glass-fronted cupboard, from the cupboard to the window. Her red hair, worn in a sort of circular halo, polished, blazing, elaborately dressed, scintillated like copper shavings shaken in sunlight. Her deep-set green eyes glowed.

Sylvaine was twenty-five. Two tiny little wrinkles, delicate as swans-down, starred the corners of her eyelids, but would not grow really deep for some years yet; they had merely reserved their places for the future.

"At bottom, and you know it," said Gilon, "Gabriel is a very decent fellow; it hurts him as much as it does you . . ."

He felt that he had run out of arguments, that he was getting lost in a maze of utter banality, and wondered how he could proceed to the conclusion of his mission.

"What the hell did I get mixed up in this for?" he kept thinking.

A clumsy diplomat at any time, Gilon was now somewhat disturbed by Sylvaine's physical appearance, by the smoothness of her warm, firm flesh as it moulded the dressing-gown and was revealed in an occasional glimpse, by her long slender legs which he saw reflected in flashes in

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the cupboard looking-glass, and by her heavy feminine scent. "Gabriel most certainly can't have been bored!" he thought.

And everything Gilon had heard about the young actress: that she had started life as a hostess in a night-club, that she had ruined Lucien Maublanc, the La Monneries' half-brother, that she had slept with the whole world, that she was a Lesbian, that she was a dangerous woman, all these things, in which he could not disentangle truth, falsehood, gossip and pure invention, were in process of dissolving and fading away.

"At heart she's just a poor unhappy child . . ."

People had indeed told him, as they do, that Sylvaine was thin, that she was not pretty, that she was stupid, that she was vulgar.

"It would have surprised me," he thought; "Gabriel really has quite good taste."

Gilon did not realize that the people who had said these things had known Sylvaine at the time, not so very distant, when she had been a dead-end kid, reduced by hunger, venal from necessity, grasping from a desire for revenge, vicious from impatience and corrupted by the old, before she had known the financial ease which was now hers, increasing success on the stage, the influence of Paris society, and a liaison physically more satisfactory than any of its predecessors—the very liaison whose end he had come to announce—before, indeed, she had acquired that sort of bloom of which he was now so well aware.

"And what disgusts me, even more than the fact itself," she cried, "is the way in which it's done."

"You know," said Gilon, "when you hurt someone, you can't do it in a good way."

"But to break it to me by someone I don't know. No doubt, it was to humiliate me a little more," went on Sylvaine, without listening to him.

"But I've been Gabriel's friend for fifteen years. I was his instructor at Saumur . . ."

"That makes no difference to me," replied Sylvaine, coming to a halt before the ex-Dragon. "And yet, I don't know, I'm quite pleased to have made your acquaintance! Because it's your fault, yours, and your hunt's, and your damned crowd of snobs, but above all yours! It's you who persuaded him to it! All winter I've heard: 'I must take up hunting again. In Paris I only fritter away my time. I'm going to take the car, darling. I shall spend three days with that good fellow, Gilon.' And I've let myself be taken in like—like nobody's business!"

"No, no, not at all, I had nothing to do with it," replied Gilon, while on a level with his eyes Sylvaine's breasts quivered beneath the sea-green silk.

"No, let me think, what more have I got to do?" he wondered. "Oh yes, the jewel-case, the clothes . . ."

"You must admit," said Sylvaine, "that he's got no excuse! He's

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casting me off in the lowest, the most disgusting way, as if I were any tart!"

"Well," Gilon thought, "that's just about what you are, my girl, however attractive you may be." His thoughts were clearly visible on his honest face, and Sylvaine went on, raising her voice: "Well, no tart would have done what I've done for him! When I think he's been living here for the last two years, and it was I who paid for everything, paid his tailor, gave him money to go and lose at the races. He was always on the point of finding a job next week! Oh, when I think of it! Do you know how much he's cost me, that Gabriel of yours?"

"Yes, yes, I know, and talking of that..." said Gilon, seizing his opportunity.

He took a red leather case from his pocket. He had never been remarkable for excessive tact where women were concerned, and Sylvaine seemed to him as mysterious and disquieting as some strange animal. He was afraid she would throw the case in his face.

"Gabriel has asked me to give you this."

Sylvaine took the case without a word, opened it, and did not even blink at the sight of the emerald and white gold bracelet.

There was also a folded cheque in the case. The red of the satin, the green of the stones and the blue of the cheque made a bad combination of colours. Sylvaine unfolded the cheque and shrugged her shoulders. It did not amount to a quarter of what she had spent on Gabriel.

For a moment she was tempted to make the gesture Gilon feared. But the Commandant's massive solidity and the sort of easy indifference with which, as he talked, he revealed the absence of an eye-tooth and a molar, slightly awed Sylvaine.

"I'd rather not work it out," she said dryly, throwing the case, the cheque and the bracelet on the bed.

Gilon concluded that Gabriel had been generous and, greatly relieved, thought it necessary to add: "Gabriel chose that for you himself."

"So he's in Paris, is he?" cried Sylvaine.

Gilon, who had bought the bracelet that very morning himself, realized at once the stupidity of his gratuitous lie.

"No, no," he replied. "He... he ordered it last time he was up."

"Indeed," said Sylvaine, pronouncing each word separately in a threatening tone, "so he had already made up his mind last time, had he? And he said nothing, just came and slept here as usual, quite at home, quite calmly, and he... Oh no, the swine!"

Gilon stroked his short moustache, ashamed, not of the infamies imputed to Gabriel, but of his own stupidity.

"And can you tell me," asked Sylvaine, suddenly calm, "where he found the money?" She pointed to the bed.

"He must have borrowed it."

"Do you know what your Gabriel is?" said Sylvaine, looking him straight in the eye. "Well, he's a *maquereau*! He's found a woman richer than I am, a title, a château, everything he wants. He's marrying for money. He likes his comforts and he'll have them. He'll even have the children into the bargain. He's a *maquereau*, and that's all there is to it! As for his Jacqueline Schoudler . . ."

"I forbid you to say anything nasty about her," cried Gilon. "She's a splendid woman!"

"A splendid woman. You make me laugh! I know them, the Schoudlers, and much better than you suppose. I know all about them, all about the father and the son's suicide. They're a fine family! 'And now this inconsolable widow, who isn't even pretty, or young, has bought the handsome De Voos to rejoice her nights. And she's given him enough to get rid of me and still preserve his gentlemanly airs . . . I'm not asking you," she went on, "how long they've been sleeping together; I don't care a damn. I expect she goes to confession every time she's made love . . . Go away, Monsieur; you've done what you came to do. But," she added, shaking a threatening finger at him, "they haven't heard the last of me."

Gilon rose to his feet, but appeared not to have made up his mind to leave.

"Since I'm here," he said hesitantly, "don't you think it would be a good idea if I took away his things? It would avoid . . ."

As he said this, he went towards a glass candlestick, which had been intriguing him for some time.

"Oh, of course!" cried Sylvaine, forcing a laugh. "At once! I don't want anything of his here!" And she called: "Emilienne!"

The little maid came in looking innocent, that is to say, looking as if she had no idea what was going on. Since the flat in the Rue de Naples was tiny, it was difficult to believe that she had not heard every word.

"Pack Monsieur's clothes in his suitcases," Sylvaine said. "Monsieur has to be away for some time . . ."

"What a fool I am to give explanations. Who do I think I'm deceiving," she thought.

"All Monsieur's things?"

"Yes, all! Didn't I say so?" cried Sylvaine impatiently.

And at the same time she was thinking: "What an idiot I've been, really what an idiot, what an absolute idiot!"

She went feverishly round the flat, opening cupboards, picking up a pipe, diaries, a packet of letters, cuff-links, a variety of books, all those things that get deposited like sediment in the drawers of a shared life.

"What an idiot! What an idiot!" She threw the meagre loot pell-mell into an open suitcase.

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"And he can use this again for the widow," she said, tearing out of a red leather frame on the chest of drawers Gabriel's photograph, which showed him with his uniform cap lightly poised on his forehead.

The maid was carefully folding the clothes from the hanging cupboard.

"Be quick! Hurry up!" said Sylvaine.

Gabriel's evening clothes were hanging among her dresses.

"Leave it!" she whispered, pushing the tail-coat to the back of the cupboard.

"He's damned well not going to strut about in the tail-coat I gave him," thought Sylvaine. "She can buy him another. My God, how good-looking he was in it, and how happy I thought I was! No, no! I won't cry. And what's more, I won't be scouted and trampled on like this!"

"And you can tell him," she cried suddenly, coming back to Gilon, "that he isn't married yet! I don't care a damn what happens! I've got nothing to lose and nothing to fear. I'll make a pretty scandal for him!"

Gilon had to make three journeys to carry the luggage to his car; he was breathless and querulous.

"I shan't forget this interview!" he thought. "Well, I suppose it could have gone worse. I've done Gabriel a damned good turn. If she'd said all that to anyone else..."

As he was going out of the door for the last time there was a crash of broken glass behind him. The candlestick was in smithereens on the floor.

"An accident," said Sylvaine, who had just smashed it to relieve her feelings.

Gilon hesitated a moment, looking at the young woman once more, from her red halo to her velvet slippers, and decided rather late in the day to put in a little work on his own account. He said: "Listen, my dear child, you may perhaps feel rather lonely. I shall be in Paris for a few days..."

"Oh no, Monsieur, that's really too much!" cried Sylvaine, banging the door behind him.

VIII

An hour earlier Sylvaine had been thinking: "When Gabriel comes back the day after tomorrow..." And then there had been a ring at the bell and this unknown man sitting cross-legged on her chair; and now all was over. She was incapable of remembering exactly what had been said during that hour. She no longer knew whether she was suffering from resentment, humiliation, or indeed from love.

Only one thing was sure: she could no longer go on living in this flat.

"But where shall I go? There isn't anywhere I want to go."

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As she wandered round the room her eyes were attracted by the cheque, and she automatically began to calculate how much money she had. Of the two millions she had received four years before from Lulu Maublanc for the twins, which were neither his nor hers—a sum of money which she had believed made her rich for the rest of her life—she had barely two hundred thousand francs left in the bank. The rest had vanished in expensive flowers, scents and exotic cigarettes. She had bought dresses at random, simply for the pleasure of buying, dresses by the score, which she sold again for a song after wearing them three times. She had bought furs, luxurious bindings for valueless books, but few jewels, for she considered that jewels should be given her by men. To be able to go into shops, order things that had attracted her passing notice, encumber her life with useless objects with which she immediately became bored, to stay when travelling in the most luxurious hotels where by being so exacting she inevitably managed to double the bill, gave her the impression of playing, at last, the part of the person she had always dreamed of being.

And then, above all, there had been Gabriel who, in barely two years—"that's right," she thought, "it was the 11th of April that we met. He might at least have waited for the second anniversary"—with his clothes, his losses at the races, his frequenting of night-clubs, had certainly cost her nearly a million. Everything had automatically been doubled. Gabriel had been her first real woman's luxury.

"And through all this I've stayed in this miserable little flat. Oh no! I shall go to an hotel tomorrow! And then I'll sell the car; I don't want that car any more. When I think that he's gone away with..."

But all these things were a secondary consideration; for Sylvaine was one of those people who never really grow anxious until they have changed their last thousand-franc note, and who, for this very reason, periodically find themselves on the edge of a precipice.

The important thing at the moment was to discover if she had really loved Gabriel, and whether she still did so.

From the drawer of the bedside table she took another photograph of Gabriel, which she had taken care not to give Gilon, and which she preferred to the one she had torn from the frame. There were still, of course, many things belonging to her lover scattered about the flat. The ivory cigarette-holder, for instance, which she put between her lips as if to renew her contact with him. She savoured the taste of cold nicotine, then threw herself on the bed to think.

"I should have gone out with Gilon this evening," she thought, "and then gone to bed with him. And let Gabriel know. That would have been a pretty revenge. And yet, not really so, he wouldn't have cared a damn. What difference can it make to him now? Besides, he's too old and ugly, and two of his teeth are missing!"

She preferred to remember the few occasions on which she had

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deceived Gabriel, either with old lovers, or with men she had just met: but these memories were no counter-balance to the weight of her suffering, nor did they induce in her the calming memory of real physical pleasure. Gabriel had been the first man to satisfy, and for so long a time, that sensual violence in her which, in the past, had driven her to avid and ill-regulated experiments. She loved his muscles, his skin and the sheer physical weight of him.

"The swine! What an idiot I've been!" She considered, but only for a moment, committing suicide in the church during the marriage ceremony. She had an appalling headache and her blood seemed to be hammering against her skull.

She was assailed with a terrible desire which annihilated her pain, or rather replaced it, which attacked her body with a ball of fire, a spinning sun like a catherine wheel. She clenched her teeth; she pressed together her crossed, her welded thighs, till the muscles seemed to burst.

And suddenly she felt the shock of the spasm tear through her body, like lightning touching the top of the conductor on its way to lose itself in the earth.

Sylvaine started up, scared, her eyes wide, as if she had just made a discovery.

Then she fell back, shaken with sobs, her beautiful copper hair spread out between the jewel-case, the cheque and the photograph.

IX

Every morning, towards eight o'clock, a big black Rolls Royce glided out of the huge gateway of the Schoudler house in the Avenue de Messine and slid away towards the Boulevard Haussmann. The passers-by, whose eyes were caught by one of the most expensive cars in the world, saw two children sitting in the back. In their glass cage, amid the pale upholstery, the arm-rests and the flask-holder, they looked like two dwarfs of princely rank.

The car came to a halt in the Rue de Ponthieu, in front of the Convent des Oiseaux; the chauffeur, removing his cap, came round to open the door, and a little girl, who was not yet fourteen, got out.

"Half-past eleven, Albert," she said loudly to the servant, though it was a pointless remark except to impress her little friends who were arriving at the same time.

Then to the little boy, who was still sitting in the car, she cried: "See you later, Jean-Noël."

"See you later, Marie-Ange," her twelve-year-old brother replied.

The car went on towards Passy and dropped Jean-Noël at the entrance of the little Lycée Jeanson de Sailly.

This time the chauffeur did not leave his seat. Jean-Noël with a gesture he endeavoured to make casual, slammed the heavy door and,

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entering the hubbub of the school, accosted some boy in his class, saying idly: "Well, how goes it? It's history and geography this morning. We shall have another boring hour with old Marin."

Jean-Noël wore plus-fours which came practically down to his ankles, and pointed shoes with crêpe-rubber soles. This gave him a reputation for considerable elegance among his fellows.

By the end of the morning, when his hands were filthy with ink, chalk and dust, and he had earned top marks for recitation, and, under the chestnut trees in the recreation yard, a frizzy-haired, fat-bottomed boy had told him a number of dirty stories which neither of them precisely understood but which nevertheless aroused in them a sort of disturbing excitement, Jean-Noël got into the big Rolls again at the school door. He had the satisfaction of knowing that, among the numerous cars which came to fetch the pupils, his grandfather's was the most splendid, more splendid even than the limousine belonging to the Argentine Ambassador.

Young, elegantly dressed mothers kissed the foreheads of their sons, who were irritated by this public display of tenderness. Elderly nannies tried to lead surly children away, or indeed were preceded by proud little personages affecting independence. The unhappiest of all the children were those who were fetched by their grandmothers.

Jean-Noël, with an air at once nonchalant and determined, made his way through the little crowd of women and children gathered on the broad pavement of the Avenue Henri-Martin by the corner of the Rue Decamps; then, having waved his hand to the frizzy-haired, fat-bottomed boy, who was going towards the Métro staircase, he fell back on the cushions of the Rolls, imagining that he was already a great banker, an ambassador, a general or a famous academician on his way to luncheon after having dealt with a number of important matters, which could not indeed fail to happen in the future, since his family was full of men with these imposing attainments.

The car stopped again at the Rue de Ponthieu, where Marie-Ange, pretending to be impatient, was nevertheless taking a great interest in the stories of a girl with yellow hair, who was boasting of having been kissed by a man.

"You ought to try it; it's very nice, you know," she said. "Besides, there's no danger. It's only when you go to bed with a boy that it's dangerous. One day I'll give you a kiss if you like, just to show you, but of course it's not the same thing with a girl."

What exactly did men do when they went to bed with a woman, and what were the gestures and sensations of that forbidden, secret and mysterious universe?

The chauffeur banged the door, the tyres whispered on the tarmac.

It was the hour when the children from the Board schools also went home, dragging their heavy shoes along the pavement or hitting each

other with their capes. But Jean-Noël and Marie-Ange had passed the age when they envied them; they no longer dreamed of kicking a broken ball along the gutters, or of hopping on one leg from square to square at hopscotch; they no longer whispered to each other: "Later on we'll play at being poor children in the garden."

Those days, which were only a few months ago, seemed to them already far away.

Nowadays Marie-Ange and Jean-Noël had other pleasures. While pretending to be unaware of them, they noticed the wondering, jealous glances marking their passage; they caught the sound of street-urchins whistling between their teeth, who cried: "Cor! What a car!"

And on the faces of adults, workmen pushing their bicycles, anxious shopkeepers, housewives laden with baskets, pale clerks, they could detect the same thought.

They had acquired the mistaken conviction that there were two distinct worlds, of which one, the privileged world, was circumscribed by the windows of the car, while the other, an inferior world, began beyond those windows, outwards from the chauffeur's cap. Two worlds who saw each other, but did not communicate, except in the relationship of lord and vassal. In their upholstered world Jean-Noël and Marie-Ange warmed themselves in the comfortable sunlight of pride. Nevertheless, the spectacle of too great misery, a blind man feeling his way across the street, a ragged, emaciated old woman or, again, certain hostile faces, gave them a passing sensation both of culpability and vulnerability. It was a slight unease, rather than a real emotion. Perhaps because an obscure instinct warned them that a well-directed stone could break the cold transparent barrier which separated the two worlds, and that this was how revolutions began.

But they could still account for these moments of unease by the fact of their childhood, and they could believe that, when they were grown up, they would never feel embarrassed by their good fortune.

Besides, they knew that they were beautiful, and this increased still further their right to be admired.

Marie-Ange's hair had become a golden chestnut; her eyes, slightly tilted towards the temples, had large green irises, her nose had tiny, chiselled nostrils, and her body gave promise of attaining to perfect proportions in the near future.

Jean-Noël had remained as fair as when he was born; his eyes, rounder than his sister's, were of a deep and sombre blue. He had already the long La Monnerie chin, and strangely resembled the portrait of his grandfather, the poet, as a child.

His breeding was shown not only in his features, but in the length of his limbs and the delicacy of his joints, rarely so apparent at his age.

If Jean-Noël still envied the freedom of the street-urchins, it was only because it would have allowed him to wander at night about

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gateways or behind the benches in the gardens to see what the couples were up to.

He did not dare question his sister. Besides, Marie-Ange would obviously not know. Nor did he dare repeat to her the stories of the frizzy-haired, fat-bottomed boy at school. He was ashamed of wanting to be friends with him, ashamed of being polite to him, and ashamed of his dirty stories. And yet, as he looked at his sister's body, at her breasts beginning to take shape beneath the austere dark-blue dress, he could not help imagining, trying to imagine the gestures and postures the frizzy-haired boy had described. And he was ashamed of that too.

As for Marie-Ange, she also would have liked to go home on foot, because she might then have discovered what it was like to be followed in the street, as the girl with the yellow hair asserted she had so often been. Marie-Ange wondered whether she would ever dare kiss a boy on the mouth, and whether she should not try the experiment once with her friend.

Thus, for the two children, behind the daily routine of Latin prose and the rudiments of algebra, which people laboured to teach them in the high-class establishments they attended, as if they were the most important things in their existence, the open-sesames as it were to their taking their place in the world, there lay a sort of permanent and anguished concern with pride and sex.

It was enough that they should sometimes fear on going to sleep at night that they would not wake up again, that every day, among the letters on the silver salver, they should see a black-edged card announcing a death, and that on some mornings they should suddenly wonder why they were alive beneath the great cloudy sky, and why their father should no longer be with them when so many old men were still alive, for a third anguish to be added to the others, that of death.

They also had some reason to be impatient with the smiling condescension with which grown-up people talked to them.

"So the children are getting a sound education, are they? That's good," people said gravely; and the children watched the chins wagging eight inches above their heads.

Certainly they were getting a sound education. That is to say, in the face of the three major problems of mankind, pride, sex and death, which had already presented themselves, they were left alone. Alone, like all human beings; alone before the mysteries of their blood and of the universe; alone with the individual peculiarities given them by the circumstances of their birth or their encounters on the dimly chosen path of life; alone to learn one day, after much effort, how to hold forth publicly, wisely or lyrically, on their afflictions, describing them in the words of social usage, love and God; alone . . .

And they would learn then that *grown-ups* do not exist, because one is never completely adult to oneself.

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But as the great black car reached the Avenue de Messine and approached the gate of the Schoudler house, another more immediate and precise concern assailed the two children and for the moment obscured their other anxieties and joys.

"Is Grandfather having luncheon at home today?" asked Jean-Noël.

"Yes, I think so," replied Marie-Ange.

And the two children drew deep breaths to give themselves courage.

X

The Baron Noël Schoudler, Commander of the Legion of Honour, a Governor of the Bank of France, proprietor of the Schoudler bank and the *Echo du Matin*, President of the Sonchelles Sugar Refineries, of the Zoa Mines and of several other businesses of similar importance, having successively lost his son, his father, and finally his wife, was sinking into the solitariness of an old tyrant.

Even his daughter-in-law, Jacqueline, who since the autumn had lived almost continuously at Mauglaives, had escaped him.

And now, having no one else at hand to torture, Baron Noël, that year, had advanced the hour of luncheon so as to be able to take it in company with his grandchildren.

The dining-room in the Schoudler house was a sinister and sumptuous place. Tall ebony cabinets were filled with Compagnie des Indes china and huge pieces of eighteenth-century English silver. Four sombre, varnished pictures in heavy gold frames, more suitable to the furnishings of a château than to those of a Paris house, seemed to totter beneath the weight of their fruits and greenery, their dead pheasants and blue-green fish. The crimson velvet curtains, whose fall was broken by loops, framed leafy vistas of the garden, but did not let in enough light.

The last Monday in April, which happened to be the day after the legislative elections, Jean-Noël and Marie-Ange waited, as usual, teased by their hunger for what seemed ages, by the high oak chairs with their Cordova leather backs.

Miss Mabel, the children's ex-nanny who had become their governess—"Mab" as they called her—was there too.

Mab never said a word during the meal, but contented herself, at regular intervals, with opening her lips to reveal her large prominent teeth. At last the Baron came in, looking sombre and ill-natured, with his giant-like stature, his short piratical beard now turning grey, and his suit of fine black cloth, relieved at the buttonhole by the rosette of the Legion of Honour.

"How very inconvenient this luncheon-hour is; it disorganizes my whole day," he grumbled. "But if I didn't take some trouble about you, I don't know who would. I must telephone your school authorities

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and tell them to change their time-table; I shall only have to say the word. It's absurd. Go on, sit down!"

The arrangement of their places at the table, which could hold twenty people, was peculiar. Facing the centre-piece and the silver foliage of the candelabra, the children sat far off, isolated, separated from their grandfather by a series of empty chairs. For Baron Noël insisted that the places of the dead should be respected. They might have been eating luncheon in a family vault.

The giant took a morbid pleasure in contemplating the ravages fate had made around him; and at the same time he dangled promotion to these empty places as future recompenses of which he was the sole dispenser.

"Jean-Noël, when you're fifteen you will have the right to sit in your father's place; Marie-Ange, when you're eighteen you may take your grandmother's chair."

The children hardly dared raise their eyes to him.

The Baron's thick eyelids allowed but a chink of his black glance to filter through, like those slits certain antique sculptors made in place of eyes in their bronze busts. A disquieting light was beginning to gather behind those slits. Sometimes they glowed red, the sign of an anger which, though always expected, was always unforeseeable, as if a fire had suddenly begun to glow within the metal hollow.

Marie-Ange and Jean-Noël were still more embarrassed by their grandfather's right hand, a plump and pointed hand which seemed to be forever rolling a crumb of bread, an apparently banal gesture, except that there was no crumb of bread and the thumb worked without object, and of its own accord, against the first and middle fingers.

The two children could not help watching this motion, while fearing that their grandfather would notice their preoccupation with it; the result was that the working hand alternately attracted and repelled their gaze.

"Yes," went on Baron Noël, "I don't know what would happen if I didn't look after you. And now it will be more necessary than ever. Because, my poor children, you're going to be to all intents and purposes utterly orphaned. Your mother has told you that she's going to marry again, has she not? Well, I'm telling you that she is. You're old enough to be spoken to frankly."

For a moment the two children's thoughts turned simply to certain forebodings, certain whisperings among the servants, certain allusions of Mab's, certain evasive, tender words of their mother at her last visit: "Perhaps next time I shall have important news for you." The news could be nothing but this, and their mother was surely going to marry that very tall man whom they had seen once and who had seemed rather ambiguous towards them, had shown a somewhat forced interest, an excessive and rather cold politeness.

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So it was that, as soon as their grandfather had finished speaking, they felt they had known about it for a long time, and then at once they began to feel sad.

Noël Schoudler knew that it was very wrong of him to have said what he had. Jacqueline, who was due to arrive the day after tomorrow, had said in her last letter: "And above all, Father, please don't say anything about it to the children; I'm very anxious to tell them about it myself." But he had been unable to prevent himself. And, besides, why should he pay attention to anyone's feelings, even the children's? Did fate spare him? Was not destiny always doing its best to wound him, killing people all about him and leaving him alone in the huge house?

And how many other grievances had he not got, he thought, which justified his punishing the innocent! It was a grievance that he had so many false teeth in his head. It was a grievance that there were so many white hairs mingled with his beard and replacing the black thatch on his chest. It was a grievance that his nights were spent in anguish. Did the children know of those atrocious sleepless nights spent wondering if one were going to die the next minute? It was a grievance that he should suffer pain about his heart and in his left shoulder, those pains Professor Lartois obstinately asserted were not angina, but only nervous phenomena. But, after all, what did Lartois know about it? It was a grievance, too, that he should have these feelings of sudden weakness which for some months past had been assailing his huge body. Never before had he had these moments of absurd doubt concerning the reality of the external world, this feeling of the strangeness of his perceptions.

And all this did not take into account the ceaseless movement of his right hand, which he was well aware of, but was unable to prevent.

And with all these ills he was still working at seventy-two, and admired himself for doing so. There were not many others to be found at his age who had been able to maintain all their activity and all their power! It was by his work that the two children there, who sat with their noses in their plates beyond the places of the dead, would live all their lives. It was by his work, since he naturally administered Jacqueline's fortune, that she lived. And now a useless coxcomb of an officer, with neither money nor name, was going to live by his work too.

A red glow appeared between the Baron's eyelids. The fire was mounting within the bronze.

"If your mother was absolutely determined to marry an idler, she might at least have married a duke!" he cried. "From the mere fact of being my daughter-in-law she could have had anyone she wanted, but De Voos, De Voos, who is he? What does that false Flemish particle mean! Madame De Voos!" he said, shrugging his enormous shoulders,

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without reflecting that the nobility of the Schoudlers, a nobility of finance, dated back only to the reign of Ferdinand II.

The children's appetite was utterly destroyed. In vain the butler offered them mountains of food on heavy silver dishes, from which arose a steam like incense. It was one of the giant's new eccentricities that he insisted on the kitchen's providing menus of ridiculous abundance. He helped himself enormously and attacked his food like an ogre. But the children had noticed that he sent his plates away still three-quarters full.

"You must eat," he said.

"Thank you, Grandfather, but I assure you I'm not hungry," replied Marie-Ange weakly.

She felt a painful lump in her throat and wondered whether she would be able to keep back her tears till the end of the meal.

"Yes, I understand; you're thinking of your father, my poor children," went on the Baron, continuing to deal out his poison. "It's a pity you did not know him better. What an admirable man he was! And how he loved you!"

Even before she expected it, the tears began flowing from Marie-Ange's eyes and soon shone on her cheeks. But that did not diminish the painful lump.

Miss Mabel, not daring to express her disapproval, parted her lips over her teeth.

Jean-Noël avoided looking at his sister; he felt that he was going to cry too. But his sorrow was counterbalanced by the hope of a vain but splendid revenge. Might there not be some means of killing this horrible Monsieur De Voos who was going to take his mother from him? Or at least of frightening him? Might one not send him every day a threatening letter? He also considered running away and imagined his mother turning tragically to Monsieur De Voos and saying: "My son has gone. It's your fault!"

"Yes, she's giving him a pretty successor, I must say," went on Baron Schoudler. "And if she wanted to take a commoner, there was always Simon Lachaume. I've told her so twenty times. There's a fellow who started from nothing and will go far, because I have made him. You will have seen that he has been a deputy since yesterday. Elected on the first round, without a ballot. That at least is satisfaction to me."

Jean-Noël's inward anger turned against Simon Lachaume. Jean-Noël loathed the short, ugly man, with the retreating chin and hairy fingers. He hated him above all because the giant quoted him as an example at three lunch-times out of four, and this would have been enough to make him loathe anyone whether he were Guynemer, Turenne or Napoleon himself.

Jean-Noël wondered whom he did love. He did not love his grandfather, that was certain. Even though today he felt vaguely that he was

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his ally against this Monsieur De Voos. Nor did he love his grandmother La Monnerie, who was withered, authoritarian and deaf. He did not much love Mab, who was untrustworthy and never stood up for them. He did not love his frizzy-haired, fat-bottomed school-friend, nor any of the masters. His mother? Yes, but now he could love her no longer, now that those things were going to happen between her and a man, those things which he would much like to see done by couples on the square-benches or in rooms.

He clung to the idea that he loved no one but his sister, and that they were alone in the world. He wanted to stand up and clasp her in his arms to console her, that is to say cry with her.

In the meantime the giant, still rolling the imaginary bread between his fingers, continued his monologue: "He's a man on whom you can count whatever the circumstances, because he owes everything to me. Do you know, children, that his seat is costing me three hundred thousand francs? But I shall have a man of mine in that party. Not that there's a single party, except the revolutionary ones, who would refuse me anything! And not even the revolutionaries, if it comes to that!" Then, pausing for effect, he said with a laugh: "I'm sure they're cheaper than the others, because they're not used to it. Unluckily for them no one needs them; that's what makes them so bitter. Nothing can resist force, you'll learn that, nothing can resist money."

He went on talking, impelled by the irresistible need to hear himself say these things, in spite of the patent absurdity of saying them to an audience sixty years younger than himself.

"Nothing has ever withstood me, because I've always had force and money. Nothing, no one; not even..."

He was going to say: "My son." And the dark chink of his glance turned towards the empty seat which had been promised to Jean-Noël. But he managed to suppress the word and, expressing himself allusively, said: "I am a man of the same sort as Peter the Great."

At that moment Simon Lachaume was announced, bringing his patron and protector the first echoes of his triumph.

"Yes, someone you can count on," Baron Noël repeated automatically.

His face seemed to give way a little; his dark gaze dimmed as if the bronze were filling with ashes.

"Your poor father also wanted to be a deputy," he said.

Marie-Ange, though there was nothing in these last words to cause it, burst into sobs. It was the painful lump; she could no longer bear it and now it broke loose. The little girl put down her napkin and left the room with an apology.

"I hope you're not going to cry?" said the giant, watching Jean-Noël, whose fine eyelashes had grown misty and the corners of his mouth turned down. "Men don't cry. And particularly a Schoudler. Never!"

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He swallowed his boiling coffee, then rose to his feet and, putting his heavy hand on the child's fragile shoulder, he said: "One day you'll remember. One day you'll say: 'I had a grandfather who was too cramped by his period but who, in other times, could have built towns, created industries, opened up provinces to prosperity. He was one of those men who are the real landmarks of history.' There, my boy: I hope you'll equal me, but I fear you won't be able to."

And he went out of the room, filling the doorway, to receive his visitor.

A few minutes later, on the seat of the Rolls, while Marie-Ange was dabbing her face with a damp handkerchief so as not to reach school with swollen eyes, Jean-Noël said: "Don't you think Grandfather's a little mad?"

But he put the thought away as soon as he had expressed it. No! A man who owned such a beautiful car, who was surrounded by such respectful servants, and who could pay three hundred thousand francs for a seat in Parliament as one might buy a theatre-stall (a matter which Jean-Noël would not fail to boast about to his friends; that was always one consolation), such a man certainly could not be mad.

XI

It had been arranged that the wedding should take place at Mauglaives in the chapel of the Château, that the guests should be limited to a few intimate friends, and that it would be announced in the newspapers only after it had been celebrated.

"At twenty, to encourage the betrothed, it's charming; but at our age, to assemble three hundred people to let them know that that night . . . No, it's a little ridiculous."

Jacqueline had already had her grand wedding, and had no wish to go to the same Mairie and the same church in which she had been united to François.

Gabriel, on his side, had reason to fear some folly on the part of Sylvaine in Paris.

"Actually I've been a bit hard on the girl," he thought. "But to hell with it, what else could I have done? Any happiness one achieves is always at the expense of someone else."

For Gabriel was happy. He was still temporarily living with his friend Gilon. But he spent most of his time at Mauglaives and every evening returned to Montprély in the new car he had just acquired, thanks to a "loan" from Jacqueline; he breathed the fresh country air, and felt a sort of enthusiasm which he could never remember having had before. "How wonderfully those branches bend in the wind! Oh, the earth, the fields! Truth is here! No one will believe that I'm not marrying for money. To hell with them! Let them

think what they like, since Jacqueline and I know what it's all about. Oh, I've forgotten to tell her . . ."

There were always a number of things he had forgotten to tell Jacqueline; but there was always tomorrow, the day after tomorrow, his whole life. Indeed, his life had suddenly become full, made sense, had direction. "To think that I often wondered what the hell I was doing in the world. Now I know. It was for this."

And till a late hour of the night he tormented Gilon, who was dropping with sleep. Gabriel could no longer stop talking, and drank six glasses of brandy without realizing it.

But as the ceremony approached, Jacqueline became nervous and reserved.

"Do you want to call the whole thing off? If you think you oughtn't to, don't let's get married," Gabriel had said to her two days before, his dignified tone pierced by a flash of underlying anger. "There's still time."

"No, you mustn't be angry with me, Gabriel," replied Jacqueline. "But you must understand that I'm like a horse who has been hurt the first time he entered a horse-box and has an instinctive fear of entering one again. That's all."

Which, of course, meant: "Am I not branded? Am I not embarking on another disaster?"

"I understand very well," said Gabriel gravely. "And I would like you to know that I have the greatest possible respect for your—how shall I say it?—your memories. I shall never ask you to forget even your sorrow."

"I'm sorry, but even if you did ask me, I couldn't do so," she said, sadly shrugging her shoulders.

They fell silent a moment.

"I know you often think of François," went on Gabriel; "and indeed it should be so. Don't ever conceal it. From what you and other people have told me, he was a man for whom I have the greatest admiration."

"Thank you," she said, putting her hand on his arm.

She felt her eyes swimming. This propensity to tears, which she had now had for some time, due perhaps to a physical impatience, exasperated Jacqueline with herself.

It was the first time in their conversations that Gabriel had called Jacqueline's first husband by his Christian name rather than referring to him by the somewhat embarrassed periphrases he had used until now. But he was perfectly sincere in what he had said.

They were walking slowly in the park, side by side. A few minutes later, though his thoughts had been straying in another direction, Gabriel was suddenly surprised by the words "The dead man's settling in" coming into his mind.

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"What a nasty look you suddenly gave me, Gabriel!" cried Jacqueline.

"No, no, not at all. I was just thinking of all the things that separate us, my poverty, for instance . . . I wonder if I have the right, for your sake . . ."

It was his usual, and almost unconscious, trick, whenever he felt himself in a position of inferiority to Jacqueline, to bring up his lack of fortune.

Jacqueline raised her hand, as if to stop his mouth.

"Please, Gabriel, we've said everything on that subject that needs saying. I have enough money for two, and need not account to anyone. Indeed, it's a great happiness to me to be in a position to give you the security that prevented you being yourself. Haven't I proved it to you?" she added gently, alluding with a smile to Sylvaine's cheque.

This man, who stood well over six feet, had exceptional physical courage and a particularly virile appearance, was destined to inspire in women a desire to protect him, even to the extent of paying his debts to other women. His weakness was a lack of money and, as they bandaged the wound, women took their revenge on him, by making sure of their possession of him.

It was Gabriel's turn to place his hand on Jacqueline's arm, murmuring: "Thank you."

They looked at each other.

"How could I ever do without a woman who gives me so much, and with such tact?" thought Gabriel.

"How could I bear to be deprived of the presence of this man, so straight and true, who has filled such a void in my life and become my dearest friend?" thought Jacqueline.

And she added aloud: "How extraordinary to think that the first time I met you I didn't like you very much. I found you antipathetic."

She was sincere in her recollection, but what she thought was antipathy had been no more than mistrust of an immediate attraction.

They laughed together.

"My darling," murmured Jacqueline.

And her little aristocratic hand, with its slender, fragile fingers, sought Gabriel's fine hand with its large clear nails.

They were really happy.

Nevertheless, they were both in a hurry for their engagement to come to an end, as if they each separately feared some catastrophe.

The morning of the wedding dawned.

Gazing at herself in the long narrow looking-glass which stood in a corner of her dressing-room, Jacqueline had a happy surprise. Her dress was a simple town-dress of a turquoise shade. But it was a coloured dress.

"It suits me very well," she thought. "I still look quite young."

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For eight years, deaths had succeeded each other around her with such speed that Jacqueline had never ceased to wear mourning.

"In our families, you know, my dear child," her great-aunt the Duchesse de Valleroy had said to her one day, "one must never buy anything but black dresses after the age of twenty-five."

And now destiny was giving Jacqueline a respite, giving her the right once more to freshness, diversity and bright colours.

Madame Florent, who was helping Jacqueline dress, chattered ceaselessly, giving vent to the emotion which assails old servants at the serious events in their masters' lives.

"Oh, it's going to be a great pleasure to have a young gentleman at the Château, and no longer to see Madame la Baronne all alone as she has been. And then Laverdure has often said to Florent that the hunt needed a keen young master who would really be a help to him . . ."

Suddenly Jacqueline trembled as she looked at her hand. She was still wearing the wedding-ring of her first marriage. "How frightful," she thought in terror; "I might have worn it to the altar!"

Since that far-distant day when François had placed it on her finger—"Fourteen years and ten months . . . Coming out of Saint-Honoré d'Eylau . . . They had been afraid it was going to rain . . . The great striped awning over the porch . . . How it comes back to me . . . But I mustn't think of that now . . ."—she had taken the ring off only once, on that recent morning when she had gone to the jewellers to have her measurement, which had not altered, taken for the new ring.

"And why shouldn't I wear both?" she wondered. "No, it can't be done. And besides, Gabriel wouldn't like it. François, I promise you, I'll have both our wedding-rings melted down to make a ring I shall always carry with me."

She reread the letter which François had written her a few minutes before he killed himself, and which she always kept by her, like a relic, in a black pocket-book. The writing was rapid, nervous, without punctuation.

"Jacqueline, I beseech you to live, I beseech you to be happy. I sure" (the word "am" was lacking; "A terribly significant omission," Professor Lartois had said) "that there is another man in the world who can take that place beside you of which I no longer feel worthy . . ."

Jacqueline kissed the letter and folded it with reverence.

"You see, François," she thought, "I'm obeying you. I'm doing as you wish. I'm sure that you would have liked Gabriel, that you do like him, that he is the man you chose."

And there again, as with the melting down of the wedding-rings, she was well aware that she was seeking some subterfuge, some false excuse.

The old Marquis de La Monnerie was to give his niece away. It was Jacqueline who guided the blind man's steps up the dark little

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chapel, which had been redecorated about 1830 in the Gothic of the period.

Gabriel was wearing for the last time his handsome red Spahi's uniform, laden with all his decorations. He had just sent in his papers.

"I wanted to wear it," he murmured to Jacqueline, "since it led me to you."

Gabriel was sometimes unexpectedly childish, and his childishness was often taken for tact.

Commandant Gilon, one of the witnesses, was exulting. He believed himself to be the real maker of this marriage and let everyone know it.

A few relations, a few lords and country gentlemen from the neighbourhood made up the congregation, and, in the front rank of the staff, Madame Florent and Madame Laverdure dabbed at their eyes.

To redeem the occasion and give it spiritual importance, Father Bouderet was present before the altar. The Dominican, who had converted Jacqueline and saved her from madness and perhaps from death in the first tragic months of her widowhood, had come from Paris to bless this union which represented the complete cure of his penitent and her return to normal life.

The Father felt with satisfaction and a little melancholy that he had reached the end of the task he had undertaken with Jacqueline.

"Are things going to go well for these two?" he wondered. "Yes, one can see that they are in love."

His movements had so much natural majesty that he looked as if he were taking part in a coronation.

Jacqueline several times raised her eyes to Gabriel's face; it was exactly in profile, and his jaw was slightly set. And then, suddenly, Jacqueline saw, superimposed on Gabriel's face, the face of François slightly out of focus; and, as on the previous occasion, she felt as if she were going to faint; but it was not due to her present emotion, but to the memory of her emotion in the past.

"I somehow always had a foreboding that there would be a disaster," she thought.

"Is she thinking of the other time?" wondered Gabriel.

Father Bouderet, gazing at the couple with profound concentration, held out the two platinum rings on a salver.

XII

In the register of the Pavillon Sévigné at Vichy—it was the first stage of their journey to the Midi—Gabriel for the first time signed himself: Comte de Voos. Jacqueline knew perfectly well that the great inverted chevron Gabriel wore on the shield of his signet-ring did not mean much, except perhaps the V of his name. Nevertheless she approved of her husband's action with a sort of silent complicity. "When you

come to think of it, ninety-nine out of a hundred titles today are no more than courtesy titles," she thought. And in any case she preferred to be called "Madame la Comtesse" rather than plain "Madame."

But above all she felt an immense joy at not having to fill in the register herself, at having by her side a man to take command and make decisions about material things. Her somewhat humiliating condition of a lonely woman had come to an end.

"Let's go up and wash our hands, and then come down and dine," said Gabriel. "It's very late."

During the meal—they had a table at the far end of the almost empty dining-room—Jacqueline said suddenly: "But why are we talking in low voices? We're not in hiding."

"Of course not," said Gabriel with a laugh.

And he himself took the champagne-bottle from its ice-bucket and filled their glasses.

When they went up together to their suite, which was furnished in pearl-grey mock-Louis XVI style, the first thing Gabriel saw, from the door itself, was the photograph of François displayed on the dressing-table.

Gabriel's features set hard and his fine clear brown eyes, with their large pupils, seemed for an instant to turn black. Without a word he went into the dressing-room.

"What ought I to do?" he wondered as he undressed. "I must stop this at once. But if I make a fuss, she'll make a point of it, if I know her. It would be damned silly to have a row about her first husband at the very start. I'll talk to her about it tomorrow. And in any case what the hell do I care!"

But he felt he was wrong in not expressing his disapproval at once and in allowing Jacqueline to retain her advantage.

As for Jacqueline, who had perfectly understood the reason for Gabriel's expression, she said to herself: "What a fool I am. I ought to have thought of it. But what can I do now? Put the photograph back in the suitcase? That would only make things worse for all three. There! That's exactly what I feared. I shall have to give up everything dear to me."

When Gabriel came back into the room, having washed his face and feeling more relaxed, he saw that the photograph had been laid flat on the dressing-table and half-covered, as if carelessly, with toilet articles.

Gabriel had been chaste for three weeks, which he considered something of a performance. He had determined to carry it through, feeling that he was thereby purifying himself.

His first embrace was hasty and violent.

Jacqueline went quickly to the bathroom. She still felt Gabriel's clutching arms upon her skin.

THE BLIND MAN'S HUNT

"It would obviously be absurd to have a child straight away," he thought as he was waiting for her. "With François she became pregnant at once. It's odd, with any other woman I'd have said: 'Well, aren't you going to get up, darling?' But this time I wouldn't have thought of it."

By the time she came back he had lit a cigarette.

"Just like François," she thought.

He took her again almost at once, but this time less hastily, which allowed Jacqueline to attain a blissful release.

Then, when he looked at her, her eyes were closed, tears were flowing from beneath her eyelids and she was making a considerable nervous effort to restrain her sobs which made her breast rise and fall.

It made Gabriel feel very proud.

"Forgive me, forgive me," murmured Jacqueline. "I'm foolish, aren't I? It's such a long time."

And this "such a long time" at once made Gabriel absolutely certain that Jacqueline was thinking of François at this very moment. He knew it was almost impossible that the first contact with a new body should not arouse the memory, however dim, of the preceding one, when it had been a habit over long months or years. Moreover, this involuntary evocation makes him who arouses it feel that he is a traitor.

And could Gabriel himself, at this moment, help thinking of Sylvaine's avidity, help feeling the long shiverings of her skin, help seeing once more her flaming tufts of hair at stomach and armpit, an infernal triangle? Could he help comparing their respective scents even?

Through the thin nightdress, which she had kept on from modesty, he contemplated Jacqueline's figure, and, through its openings, her fine, transparent skin. Her breasts had an easy expansiveness from having had two children.

"And I've had girls in brothels, and Berber girls..." Gabriel thought.

In spite of the promise he had made himself, he said suddenly: "Are you planning to keep that photograph with you always?"

Jacqueline looked at him sadly.

"No, I'm sorry, Gabriel. I understood perfectly just now. But it's not my fault; it was the maid who unpacked my suitcase. She unpacked the photograph without realizing. If I'd unpacked myself, you must believe that..."

She was speaking the absolute truth.

"All the same you brought it with you," said Gabriel.

"Listen, darling, I thought that it was understood between us..."

"Yes of course, of course," he said. "I've no reason in the world for asking you not to have the photograph. It's perfectly understandable."

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And once again he felt certain that he was committing a serious tactical error by making this concession. He could not help thinking: "A perpetual concession."

But he had a reason for being conciliatory. The latent anxiety he had felt, these last weeks, of a possible physical discord between Jacqueline and himself was dissipated this first night.

"And then I must say," added Jacqueline softly, "that if François were not dead, we should never have known each other, never have been here now."

"Naturally!" thought Gabriel, without realizing the position of inferiority that she placed him in by saying this, or the ease with which he had accepted it.

Because he was alive, he believed himself to be the victor.

Much moved, Jacqueline gently touched the pink scar which, like the cleft in a long loaf, divided Gabriel's left forearm down its whole length. It had been on the right side that François had borne the delicate, pale, rather puckered furrow which was the result of a wound from a bursting shell.

"I certainly seem to be dedicated to men with wounds," murmured Jacqueline smiling.

From then on, and wherever they went, Jacqueline always had François's photograph in her room; she had merely slipped into the frame—another subterfuge—the photographs of her two children, which partially concealed the picture of their father.

But the dead man's eyes were still visible above them.

CHAPTER TWO

The Deux-Villes Theatre

SIMON LACHAUME, standing in front of the chimney-piece which was framed by two small columns of green marble, was putting his cuff-links into his shirt.

The flat was low-ceilinged, as is often the case in houses on the Left Bank. This one, in which Marthe Bonnefoy lived, gave on to the Quai Malaquais. Beyond the drawn curtains the misty late-September evening lay across the Seine, enveloping the Palace of the Louvre and its gardens in cotton-wool.

The room in which the young deputy was slowly dressing, with its

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soft light, its chimney-piece in the shape of a little classical temple, its fire of short logs on brass-headed dogs, was like a small hollow stone, comfortable and warm.

Simon Lachaume knew that as soon as he left the house he would gaze up at the window with mingled tenderness and pride. He remembered a freezing night, eight years before, when, returning from the deathbed of the poet Jean de La Monnerie, he had crossed this same deserted quay on foot, at one o'clock in the morning, feeling within him that he was beginning his true destiny. Could he have imagined then that his destiny would lead him to this house, over which his eyes had passed without his seeing it (for it is a fact that, among the thousands of impressions our retinas receive, only those that correspond to some desire or memory ever make any impression)?

Meanwhile Simon gazed into the fire as it gently warmed his trouser-legs, and in the regular flicker of the flames he saw an August countryside, a huge harvested field, burnt by the sun, the cut corn gathered in sheaves, or aligned in stooks across the stubble, while the soldiers slept during a period of rest on manœuvres. And then, thinking of the tenderness he would feel later, when the present moment would be recapitulated in his memory, he felt that sort of anticipatory nostalgia which is the very consciousness of happiness.

Oh, how precious she was, this woman whose presence, whose body and whose talk gave him this glad hour of happy relaxation, seeming to bring simultaneously to the level of his consciousness every dream that lay latent in his mind!

He felt overflowing with a sort of universal but inexpressible gratitude for having met, now that he had passed his fortieth year, a mistress such as this, with whom he felt still young, with whom he had the sensation of discovering himself all over again, both as a novice to worldly intrigue and to the caresses of the body.

He turned slowly towards her and said: "Thank you, Marthe."

"What for, dear Simon?" she asked smiling.

He made a vague gesture.

"For existing," he replied.

Marthe Bonnefoy was fifty-six, had fine silver hair, bright, soft and silky, which she dressed cleverly, so that, far from making her look older, it was an ornament to her; she had magnificent shoulders. Her smile never grew tired and she had perfectly regular, very white teeth; when she stopped smiling, the flesh of her cheeks smiled on, radiantly.

She had no need to fear the society of young girls; beside her they seemed to belong to another species, to some less advanced race, and Marthe Bonnefoy seemed to be saying to them: "There, my children, this is what you must become."

Among women who had passed their thirtieth year she knew no rival.

"Marthe? She is one of those phenomena of which one or two exist

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in every century; she's a Ninon de Lenclos. To sleep with her is one of the ways of winning immortality!" Edouard Wilner, the dramatist, himself a masculine phenomenon of the same type, was accustomed to declare in his slow, hoarse, ironical voice.

To the gossip of her jealous friends Marthe Bonnefoy replied, with the simplicity to which her certainty of superiority gave her a right: "Not at all, I have not lived a more dissolute life than many other people we know. If I've had more lovers than they, it's because I've remained desirable longer than they have, that's all." Simon gazed at her, as she sat in her luxurious *deshabille* of black satin, edged with a froth of white tulle which proudly surrounded her head with a sort of ruff, and cascaded down her bosom like a waterfall, rebounding from her slim round knee to spread in a circle on the floor.

One thought of some famous portrait, some unpainted masterpiece which she must resemble.

Simon put on his coat.

"Oh, please, darling, don't wear that armlet, it's horrible. It's terribly provincial," said Marthe. "It can't make any difference to the sorrow you feel for your mother's death."

"Yes, I know," said Simon, seeking an excuse; "I put it on to visit my constituency."

"But you wear it all the time. A black tie is quite enough, I assure you."

She went to the dressing-table for a pair of nail-scissors.

"You'll give me this pleasure, won't you?" she said.

And she began unpicking the piece of dull *crêpe* from Simon's sleeve.

"She's only ten years younger than my mother was. She's astonishing," Simon thought.

His glance went back to the chimney-piece. On the green marble shelf, above the little façade of the temple, were placed, like the *lares* of the house, photographs of men, nearly all politicians, all of whom were celebrated or had had their moments of celebrity. The inscriptions, flattering and affectionate, were worded in such a way that they implied rather more than the literal sense of their discreet phrasing. Edouard Wilner—who on this chimney-piece represented literature—caddish as always, but with a caddishness which was expected of him and from which any departure would have been unforgivable, had, instead of writing "*À Marthe*," scribbled across his picture "Ah! Marthe," followed by ten dots. The photograph of the great Professor of Medicine, Émile Lartois, in Academician's uniform, bore a superscription which, though most artistically arranged, was practically illegible. Among these faces of varying degrees of nobility, which somewhat overlapped each other, were several Prime Ministers; the older ones, of a somewhat faded sepia colour, were the faces of the dead and belonged already to history. From the living one could easily have

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constructed a cabinet; and, moreover, none was constructed without Marthe being consulted by her past or present lovers, without her participating in the intrigues, arranging meetings in the friendly atmosphere of her house between opponents who could not have met elsewhere, or giving her advice concerning the distribution of the portfolios and arranging to place her protégés.

By obtaining her favours Simon not only felt as if he were entering the Panthéon, but he was also sure, unless he committed some unpardonable error, of becoming an under-Secretary of State in the very near future.

While pretending to warm himself, Simon was amusing himself by comparing the various writings on the chimney-piece, the convoluted or modest signatures, the bungled flourishes; he was also delighted to see that, among the various faces, there were several which resembled his own, as if the same type of man, spectacled, bald, large and pugnacious of chin, recurred as a sort of constant in Marthe's life. Perhaps it was because that type of man frequently achieved power.

He glanced at the live, coloured image of himself in the looking-glass above the photographs.

Marthe Bonnefoy respected Simon's silence, knowing that when politicians are not talking they are thinking of themselves, and finding among their reflections reasons for pride which are valuable to their careers.

And this one, who seemed to her so young, who was still in process of formation, she looked on with great tenderness.

"It's a curious fact," Simon said suddenly, "that the Republic seems to be governed in general by ugly men."

Marthe's expression seemed to say: "I have always been beautiful enough for two."

Then aloud she said: "You know Talleyrand's saying: 'A good-looking man is only a fortnight ahead.'"

Simon was delighted; in telling him the saying Marthe had made him a splendid present.

And indeed she did not care for handsome men. She liked men of talent, and particularly those who ruled, who were capable of ruling, or whom she made rulers.

Some secret psychological quirk allowed her to achieve complete physical satisfaction with them alone. Created in body and mind to be a king's mistress, she disproved the common idea that certain people cannot succeed because they are living outside their proper century. She had succeeded in being queen under the Republic by changing her prince as frequently as did the people, and by forecasting in her personal choices, with extraordinary precision, the tastes of the sovereign Parliament. She was the incarnation of the third Marianne. She liked to straighten the ties at tribunes' throats, stroke stomachs replete with

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electoral banquets, and listen to talk of army estimates while removing blackheads from power's back.

Had not a predecessor of Simon's pushed gallantry so far, since he was Minister of Fine Arts and had to commission a new bust of the Republic, as to suggest to the sculptor that he should take Marthe Bonnefoy for model? It was beneath her effigy that, in a certain number of French towns, young couples were married.

But with all this Marthe had no taste for ostentation. She was perfectly happy living in the heart of Paris, opposite the enormous palace, in which, doubtless, a few centuries earlier she would have been living, with her low-ceilinged flat, pleasantly furnished in Directoire style (Diane de Poitiers superimposed on Madame Tallien), which was the first place to which her "great friends" thought of coming with their triumphs and disasters.

Long after they had put an end to a regular liaison, she was still willing, from time to time, to spend with them a night spiced with that particular vice which is memory. She had her own way of remaining fondly attached to them, always and in all circumstances, for she had learned that men, even when cast down by some scandal, invariably ended, provided they lived long enough, by returning to power. And the lover of the moment found it difficult to take umbrage; the others had already done so much for him!

When Marthe Bonnefoy took a new lover, she had the charming habit of inviting him to dinner with a few "great friends," a dinner with few guests, "never less than the Graces, never more than the Muses," to announce the fact to them.

It was on coming away from the last dinner of this kind that Edouard Wilner, on the staircase, putting his hand on Simon's shoulder, had said: "What a treasure Marthe is! She introduces us to so many people!"

It was Simon's luck that Marthe should have picked him out immediately after the April elections as one of the most interesting young members of the new legislature.

"He's got the right stuff in him," Stenn, the leader of the parliamentary group to which Simon belonged, had said. "It's up to you, Marthe, to tailor it."

"And why not indeed?" she had replied with her brilliant smile.

And now Simon was the Benjamin of this clique of powerful men who could not help but assist him to climb the ladder to honours, because he was initiated into their secrets, their intrigues and their vices.

Marthe had made Simon one of the heirs-presumptive to that throne of fifteen places which is called the Government bench, and when she saw him take his place on it, she would have the pleasure of being able to say: "Lachaume? We made him!"

"We," that is to say she and the men on the chimney-piece.

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"A good-looking man..." Simon repeated to himself, so as to remember Talleyrand's quip. And the thought of Talleyrand made him think of Noël Schoudler's father, old Baron Siegfried, who, as a child, had seen the great diplomat. "To think that I have known a man who saw Talleyrand. How easily one shakes hands with history..."

And this brought him back to his main immediate preoccupation.

"Marthe," he said, "I'm anxious about Noël Schoudler. I've a feeling that he's lost his grip. This morning an idiot came to propose building a railway across Africa, from the Congo to Zanzibar. He looked at the plans and said: 'No one but I can finance your project. I'll back your company. In six months construction can begin.' If tomorrow someone proposes building the Channel tunnel, he'll make the same answer."

And Simon detailed the banker's extravagances during the last few months. Schoudler had bought the Talma Theatre which was bankrupt, put two million into a dressmaking concern whose collections he had shown in his drawing-room in the Avenue de Messine; he seemed to have decided to extend his power feverishly over every branch of human activity. For the *Echo du Matin*, of which Simon, being no longer able to fulfil the functions of secretary-general since his election, had been promoted director, Noël Schoudler had also a vast plan; he wanted to make a world newspaper of it, with an edition in London, one in New York, one in Rome and another in Rio.

"I'm afraid he's heading for disaster," Simon concluded. "He's a man to whom I owe a great deal, and I'm practically the only person he'll still listen to. What ought I to do?"

Marthe Bonnefoy lit a cigarette, which in her was a sign of thought. She paced up and down the room, the silk folds of her *deshabille* flowing about her.

"And does he still continue to make that odd movement, as if he were rolling a marble in his hand?" she asked. "It's embarrassing and rather disagreeable."

She reflected again.

"You mustn't do anything, my dear Simon," she went on. "If you cross him, sooner or later you'll quarrel. So you must encourage his whims, and keep an eye on him."

She knew from experience that society is so constituted that it dare not turn against its ancient idols, even when they begin to crumble; those who first see that the idols are no longer to be believed in are overborne by those who still have faith; the idols arouse too much fear, there are too many attendant priests still growing fat in their service to allow of their being overthrown; one must wait till they collapse of their own accord on their rotting, crumbling pedestals.

"*Folie des grandeurs*, among those who have achieved power, is a strange but far from infrequent disease," went on Marthe, repeating a

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phrase she had heard. "Robert" (this was President Stenn, whose features honoured the chimney-piece; Marthe was honest and acknowledged her sources) "explained it to me one day in the most marvellous way, with that wonderful intelligence of his. It seems that it's quite terrifying how many old men go on controlling enormous businesses, indeed the country itself, when they're already quite mad or senile, and nothing can be done about it."

Marthe Bonnefoy went to Simon, put her arm round his waist, leaned her silver hair against his shoulder, and, talking to his reflection in the looking-glass, said: "If Schoudler collapsed, it would of course affect Anatole Rousseau's position. That, I think, would not be altogether displeasing to Robert and his friends. They'd even be rather grateful to anyone who could put his shoulder to the wheel a little . . ."

"But Rousseau is my old chief, you know that, Marthe. I started with him. I was head of his secretariat."

"That can't be helped, darling. We don't like Rousseau. I've already told you so," replied Marthe in a hard voice which made the position unalterably clear.

Then her voice grew tender again, the arm round his waist clasped him more lovingly, the two faces in the looking-glass drew closer together.

"You're young, Simon; you've got fine feelings; you can give rein to them up to a point. But don't go and drown yourself in an attempt to save corpses. You do understand, darling?"

She was smiling.

"Yes, yes. Thank you, Marthe," Simon said.

He slid his hand into the opening of the *deshabille*, an understanding, a grateful hand, pushed the white tulle frills aside; and in the looking-glass he watched his fingers fondling that beautiful breast, supported of course, but still full, round and soft, which had been caressed by hands that had signed treaties, reprieves and laws.

II

The De Vooses spent three months in Italy.

Gabriel did not know the country, but Jacqueline had visited it twice with François.

However, the newly-married couple avoided Lake Maggiore and the Borromean Islands, which had been very fashionable in 1913, when Jacqueline had stayed there on her first honeymoon, for the steeper banks of Como. Reasons they did not mention caused them, similarly, to choose Vicenza rather than Verona, and the towers of San Gimignano rather than the rose-coloured stones of Sienna. And then, suddenly, Jacqueline felt sad. She wanted to see Sienna again all the same.

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"All right, let's go there; there's nothing to stop us," said Gabriel.

"But you won't sulk, darling?" she said. "You really ought to see it."

And a few hours later, standing in the Municipio Square, with its almost miraculous architectural perfection, or wandering through the rooms of the picture gallery with its Sodómas and Beccafumis, Jacqueline gazed covertly at Gabriel's large face, unable to decide whether it showed indifference, resentment, boredom or merely that haste to move on which is so usual among tourists.

Gabriel seemed happy only at the wheel of the car, crossing those wonderful landscapes which his concentration on driving prevented his appreciating. Nevertheless, they were unable to avoid those places obligatory to all lovers and sacred to all memories: Venice, Florence and Rome.

Jacqueline wanted to give Gabriel the feeling of being in process of discovering all manner of wonderful things with her, and at the same time to make him accept those places dear to her memory, that she might be able to talk of them freely.

In the steep streets, laden with the warm scent of pines, before the famous statues displaying their marble flesh in the cool depths of museum galleries, by murmuring fountains and mossy basins where died the green and gold of the evening light, Jacqueline, with a strange joy, almost savoured suffering as she walked with her two lovers, the living and the dead. Sometimes, too, she travelled with the memory of her father.

"Daddy wrote a poem about this place . . ." she would say.

And then she would recite:

*O soirs incendiés sur la Ville Eternelle!
Du sommet Palatin, un soleil rouge et rond
Répétait devant moi les ordres de Néron . . .*

or again:

*Nous marchions auprès du jardin des Vestales,
Et parmi ce chaos de marbre renversé
Je cherchais quelque socle où pouvoir te placer.
L'heure était chaleureuse et les ombres étales.*

*Soudain, d'un geste vif, je te vis délacer
Le léger ruban blanc qui nouait ta sandale,
Et poser en riant ton pied nu sur la dalle
Où deux mille ans plus tôt César était passé.*

She seldom went on beyond the second stanza. So as not to appear taken in by the old-fashioned quality of the lines, or subject to excessive piety, she would add: "I think that was when he was in love with the

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Casarini! Her foot must have been hurting her that day. That's what poetry's about."

But Gabriel was neither an artist nor an intellectual. He looked on Italy as a practical school for professional writers.

For his part, surfeited with churches and Descents from the Cross, his fingers soft from Holy Water, he was surprised to find himself thinking, in front of some carved pulpit or faded fresco, while a guide snuffled out facts to which he paid no attention: "Profession: husband of a rich widow . . ."

He thought the working-class girls in the streets more beautiful than he had expected, but not so the women of the aristocracy, who were less seductive than D'Annunzio's novels had led him to suppose. He met so many dukes, marquesses, princesses and baronesses in Roman drawing-rooms that it seemed to him impossible that all their titles could be authentic; and this gave him greater assurance in bearing the purely imaginary title he had bestowed on himself. And from the few advances he made or that were made to him in these drawing-rooms, he discovered that Jacqueline was not jealous; from which he concluded that she felt no passion for him but remained in love always with the memory of her first husband.

When they returned to Paris at the beginning of October, Madame de La Monnerie, Jacqueline's mother, asked Gabriel in her peremptory voice: "Well, François? How did you like Italy? Well, why are you looking so glum? Oh yes, of course, your name's Gabriel. I shall never get used to it. I ended by disliking the place. My husband went there too often with other women. Whenever he had a new mistress he always took her to Italy."

"It must clearly be hereditary," Gabriel murmured.

"What? What did you say?" asked Madame de La Monnerie, who was deaf as ever.

"I said it was very beautiful," said Gabriel more loudly.

On her side Jacqueline was thinking: "Perhaps we should really have done better to have gone to Spain. Well, we'll go there next year."

Because she controlled the money, had lived long years alone and had also gained experience during her first marriage, it was she who always made the important decisions. Gabriel, with his rather braggart air of coping with everything, which was based merely on the fact that he intended doing something about it, in fact only looked after the details. It was he who sat on bulging suitcases, went to the bank, filled in their names in the hotel registers. He acquired the mannerism, frequent among idle men, of looking at his watch all the time so as to keep to some meaningless timetable.

Having thus apportioned the cares of their life in common, Jacqueline and Gabriel gave each other a mutual feeling of security.

They decided to spend most of the year at Mauglaives. For their

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Paris home Jacqueline decided on the house in the Rue de Lübeck, whose ownership she shared with her mother, and in which, since the poet's death, the old lady had lived alone.

The old lady raised certain difficulties, for the principle of the thing, complaining of having to alter her habits. In fact she was quite pleased.

As she grew older, Madame de La Monnerie withered without becoming bent. She still preserved, above her proud, stern face, her mass of blue-white hair, but she no longer had the majestic shoulders of the past.

"My dear François," she said to Gabriel, "I had such a magnificent body, with which, alas, I never did anything; and I may say that if I had, my husband would have been the last man to care. Well, nowadays, when I'm dressing, I don't mind admitting to you that I close my eyes so as not to see myself in the looking-glass. It's terrible to think what one can become!"

She had lost interest in making dolls out of bread, which had been her favourite pastime for many years. Nowadays she devoted four hours of her day to playing bridge with friends of her own age.

Gabriel made no objection to going to live with her. He only made one condition: "Jacqueline," he said, "do tell your mother to call me by my right name."

The children, to their great relief, also came to live in the Rue de Lübeck. Jean-Noël continued going to school at Jeanson de Sailly and Marie-Ange was withdrawn from the Convent des Oiseaux so as to go to the Convent of the Assumption which was a few doors away from the La Monnerie house.

By this change they were relieved of the luncheons with their grandfather, except on Thursdays, and lost their daily ride in the big Rolls.

Between the children and Gabriel there was as yet no contact or familiarity, they preserved towards him a cold and deferential attitude; the word "Daddy," which they had been told to use, came uneasily to their lips, and embarrassed Gabriel himself. All the same, Marie-Ange could not help being aware of her stepfather's elegance and good looks. In his presence she selected her words with care and used phrases of a certain preciousness. As for Gabriel, his wild, bright eyes sometimes rested for long silent moments on the two children. Then his chest swelled with a long, sad sigh, and he looked at his watch.

III

They had set about transferring Jacqueline's personal possessions from the Schoudler house, that is to say all the memorials of her life with François.

Gabriel willingly undertook to arrange about the removal men; it was part of his duties.

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But on the morning of the removal Jacqueline, who was not normally subject to this form of illness, was attacked by an appalling migraine whose origin was clearly psychological, but none the less painful for that.

"Gabriel," said Jacqueline in an exhausted voice, "I'm going to ask you to come to the Avenue de Messine. I'm sorry about it. I know that it won't be very agreeable for you; but I'm really too ill and it's got to be done. And then, when it's all over, we shall never speak of it again, never again," she said with a vague gesture which promised every concession for the future.

Gabriel very nearly refused out of hand, and told her that she might have chosen another day on which to be ill. Nevertheless, he forced himself to be kind.

"All right," he said, "I'll come."

Jacqueline was extremely grateful to him for his understanding.

That very morning, very early indeed, Baron Schoudler had made a detailed inspection of the rooms which had once formed the apartment of François and Jacqueline; he had searched every drawer and removed every object, as well as many of the papers, which he thought should remain in his possession, including his son's pearl studs.

Then, instead of going to the bank, as he normally did, the old giant had shut himself up in his study on the first floor, and given orders that he was not to be disturbed on any pretext whatever.

When Gabriel and Jacqueline arrived, the removal men were already there. Jacqueline gave the necessary orders and then went and lay down on her old bed with a compress on her forehead. She seemed to be living in a black fog streaked with gold circles, and every word every sound, echoed painfully behind her temples. She wondered whether she were not beginning some serious illness. Yet, at the same time, she had a vague feeling that these pains were masking the emotion this furniture-moving aroused in her, and prevented the resurgence of memories that were too cruel. "Poor Gabriel, how kind he is," she thought.

"Poor Gabriel," his lips pursed, his brow furrowed, was supervising the packing of the books and ornaments in the next room, for there were no large pieces of furniture to move.

From time to time he asked for instructions through the open door. "The white china lamp?"

"No, that stays," Jacqueline answered weakly.

Jacqueline could see that white lamp, which was only three paces away from her, as it had been, lit, in the distant past. How many evenings, how too few evenings, François and she had sat by its light! And now Jacqueline thought that there well might be another lamp in the Rue de Lubeck for Gabriel and herself, and perhaps another at Manguaives. And she pulled the wet bandage down over her eyes, because the thought of a repetition of happy hours made her tears flow.

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At the bottom of an empty cupboard Gabriel found a pair of evening shoes. There they were, their patent leather a little dusty, pointing out into the room. It was as if the shadow of the dead man, standing in these shoes, had remained in the cupboard and was supervising the packing. Gabriel instinctively closed the door. His heart was beating faster.

"What about these shoes?" he shouted to Jacqueline. "Do you really want to keep them?"

"Give them to the servants," she replied without moving.

"You really seem excessively ill, Jacqueline," Gabriel went on with some bitterness. "I wonder if you'll be able to stand the fatigue of hunting next season. We must have you properly looked after."

"Yes, yes," she murmured conciliatingly.

Gabriel gazed at his wife as she lay there, her head resting on a pillow.

"It was here on this bed that he used to have her," he said to himself. "She used to wait for him, her legs slightly apart, as she is at this moment . . ."

He felt the blood boiling in his body and his arms stiffened. He turned away, trying to give all his attention to the removal men, who, with their large, dusty, careful hands, were opening nests in the straw of the cases for the more fragile objects. But Gabriel's eyes came back to the doorway and to the bed.

"She hasn't got migraine; it's a lie; she's making love with him again. And, what's more, in front of me, in front of me!"

He moved across the room but could not exorcise the sight. His eyes continually turned back to the compress, lying like a mask across her face, and beneath it he imagined his wife given up to her desire for another.

"Well, let her get excited over a corpse if she wants to! I only married her for her money. When I want her, I'll — her."

Obscene words from barrack squares and brothels came into his mind and he made use of them like alcohol to banish the truth he did not wish to admit: the knowledge that he loved Jacqueline and suffered, in his pride and in his flesh, from jealousy of the past.

And now, here in front of him, obsessing him like a puzzle, the death of the other, François, who was no more than remains in an oaken box, was reconstructing itself, fragment by fragment, in the neat precision of a pair of shoes, the leg of his chair, the curve of an old pocket-book where it had lain against his chest, the ridge against which his fingers had rested on a fountain-pen.

Suddenly another door opened and Baron Schoudler appeared. He had been unable to adhere to his self-imposed prohibition.

He filled the whole doorway, a red glow between his heavy lids, and the hand against his coat rolling an invisible nut.

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"Splendid, Monsieur, I congratulate you," he said to Gabriel. "You have not only taken away my grandchildren, but you've now come to tear from an old man the last relics of his son. Yes, I congratulate you. You're performing an admirable work."

Put out of countenance by the attack of this sudden apparition, Gabriel replied haughtily but with a stutter all the same: "But Monsieur . . . I do not understand . . . It seems to me . . . Indeed I am only here . . ."

At the sound of their voices Jacqueline got up and came to the defence of her husband with an energy of which Gabriel would not have thought her capable at the moment. Seeming still smaller and more frail beside the giant, she confronted him.

"Father," she cried, "Gabriel is here because I asked him to come, because I'm ill, and because he's been kind enough not to leave me alone at a very unhappy time; he knows how unhappy it is and understands. I hope you won't be so monstrous as to reproach me with having married again, considering the responsibility you bear for François's death."

She drew breath.

"I think that in the circumstances, Father," she concluded, "we had better not see each other again except on strictly business matters."

She was immediately sorry to have used that phrase, because the Baron was the trustee of her fortune.

"That is exactly what I was coming to say to you," replied Noël Schoudler with an icy smile. "But don't forget that I am the guardian of my grandchildren and that you are dependent on me in more ways than you imagine. Pillage, Monsieur, pillage while you can!" he said as he went away.

Jacqueline did not go and lie down again; her migraine had suddenly got better. She stood leaning against the door-frame, her damp handkerchief in her hand.

"I'm sorry, I'm terribly sorry, darling," she said gently.

Gabriel did not reply. He was furious at having allowed himself to be insulted for the first time in his life without replying, furious to have felt himself in a false position. It was all Jacqueline's fault. Besides, she did not look well, and he hated her for that too.

From a dark corner of a little wire-latticed bookcase one of the workmen removed an automatic pistol, and assumed that astonished, bantering expression which simple people often adopt in the presence of weapons. The workman was clearly about to make a joke, when Gabriel saw his wife turn pale, put out a nervous hand, take the pistol and put it in her bag, as if it were some holy object she did not wish impure hands to touch or play with.

Once again Gabriel felt a hot surge of anger irresistibly invading the muscles of his body. He seized the first object within reach, which

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happened to be a photograph album, and threw it as hard as he could on to the floor. The pages came loose and the photographs scattered. And Gabriel recognized Rome, Florence, Venice, the same fountains, basins and canals, the same palace façades, and the *other* in almost every photograph.

"Never force yourself to do a kind action again, since you're incapable of carrying it through," said Jacqueline. "You make one pay too dearly for it."

He turned away and went out, banging the door.

IV

At his narrow desk, from which he directed every detail of his theatre, as a captain runs a ship from his bridge, except that he felt himself to be not only the master under God, but God himself, Edouard Wilner was writing.

The lamp lit up his heavy, leaning body, his white, short hair, slightly curled at the ends, and the back of his vast fat neck.

Beyond the rosewood desk a young man stood waiting till Jehovah consented to notice his presence.

The young man, his face discreetly powdered, was one of the actors in Edouard Wilner's new play which had just gone into rehearsal.

The great dramatist eventually raised his head and put down his pen.

"Oh, it's you, my dear Romain!" he said. "Yes, I sent for you . . ."

His voice fell from his mouth like water from a gargoye on the porch of a cathedral from behind whose doors sounded the diapason of the organ.

His eyelids seemed to fall straight from his forehead to merge with the lines of his cheeks; his huge ears seemed to perceive the distant murmurs of cosmic space; and his nostrils to breathe five times the amount of air that ordinary mortals need. The corner of his lip was curved in a universal disdain. Irony was concentrated in his eye.

For forty years Paris had been comparing this extraordinary face to everything it could think of.

"I sent for you because I wanted to tell you that I find your wife very charming," Wilner went on.

The young actor smiled half in surprise and half in embarrassment.

"Yes, yes, very charming. I say so because I think it," Wilner continued. "She has a very pretty body, and she's intelligent and seems to have feeling. Oh, yes, she's very charming, she pleases me very much."

His frequent repetitions and particularly his manner of beginning a sentence with the words which had ended the last made Wilner's speech slow.

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Romain Dalmas, who, beneath his discreetly applied powder, concealed considerable liveliness of temper, and who knew what Wilner was capable of, was expecting to receive some ignoble proposition and felt somewhat anxious for the immediate future of his career.

"I'm delighted," he replied coldly. "She pleases me very much too."

"Good, excellent. I think you're very lucky."

He allowed a silence to fall during which he took advantage of the young man's uneasiness. He rose to his feet. Standing up, he almost reached the ceiling of the tiny room and seemed to be condemning his visitor to immediate asphyxiation.

"Very lucky. You must be very sweet to her. Women, you know, I know them well; they're sensitive little creatures. Do you give her flowers?" he asked.

"Of course; anyway from time to time," said the young actor, disconcerted once more.

"My boy, you must give her flowers every day. So I'm going to raise your salary by twenty francs, so that you can buy her a bunch of flowers every morning. Are you pleased?"

Astonishment, joy and gratitude brought a blush to Romain Dalmas's cheeks.

"Oh, thank you, Monsieur Wilner! That's really very kind of you!" he cried.

The great dramatist raised a large, pale, flaccid hand.

"Don't call me 'Monsieur' Wilner, as ceremoniously as if I were the Chief of Police or the Manager of the Galeries Lafayette. Leave that to the attendants. Call me . . . call me what everyone calls me . . ."

"Thank you, *Maitre*," said Romain Dalmas.

Wilner gave a slight nod of his head in sign of satisfaction.

"You will therefore have two hundred francs a day. Look, the alteration has been made to your contract. You have only to sign there. Take my fountain pen," said Wilner, adding this extra honour to his kindness.

"All the nasty things people say about him are really exaggerated," thought the actor as he put his initials in the margin of the contract. "He's really wonderful to the people he likes. And how tactful in his generosity, in his way of letting me know that he's pleased with me . . ."

"Good. Well, I'll see you later at the rehearsal," said Wilner dismissing him.

The actor went out, satisfied with life, his profession, his part, his wife, his director and himself. He went down the corkscrew staircase which led on to the stage. Suddenly, half-way down the second flight, he stopped abruptly and slapped his hand to his forehead.

"Oh, the swine!" he muttered.

He had just remembered that, in accordance with the general clauses

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of Wilner's contracts, an actor, if he received a salary of two hundred francs or more, was obliged, in a piece played in modern dress, to pay for his clothes himself.

The auditorium of the Deux-Villes theatre was circular, handsome and classical, with its gilded stucco, its red velvet lining the fronts of boxes and balconies, and its high, domed ceiling. Edouard Wilner liked to recount the origin of the theatre's name.

"At the time of the Directoire there were two actors of the name of Deville . . ."

For the moment the rows of seats were covered with long dust-sheets; the great building was slumbering in the dusty penumbra of the beginning of the world; only the stage was faintly lit with a dawn-like yellow. The scene was not set, and props, footlights and pieces of scenery were visible.

The tall silhouette of Edouard Wilner moved silently up the auditorium. A stall creaked in the middle of the second row. The old god had sat down on the edge of night to shape his new creatures.

Esther Maugard and Jacques de Simur, in the persons of Sylvainè Dual and her opposite number Romain Dalmas, were rehearsing a transition scene.

Dalmas had to speak a long, bitter tirade and, sustained by his resentment at his false rise, he spoke it well.

"Good; that's absolutely right," thought Wilner.

While Simur was speaking, Esther had to move from a chair to a nearby sofa, without taking her eyes off her partner.

From where he was sitting Wilner could see Sylvainè Dual's thighs under her tailored skirt.

"That child's got pretty thighs," he thought. "Made for pleasure." And he shouted: "Begin again!" and he thought: "And to think that on the night of the dress rehearsal I shall have to put all the deaf old men in the first three rows and that they'll have the advantage of them . . . Oh well! It's a consolation one can well afford to give them." His gaze became more concentrated.

"Is that all right, *Maitre*?" Dalmas asked.

"Yes . . . not quite . . . Try to put more irony into 'How boring to hear someone talk of love when one no longer loves!' And you, Dual, do your move again."

"Obsessive . . . obsessive as the flowers on the wallpaper of a strange room . . . Well! Is that good or not? In any case it won't serve for thighs. But it might do for something else?"

He took a notebook from his pocket and, on the chance, made a note of the simile which had just come into his mind. Then he said: "Well, my dear Romain, it was better the first time. You must do it as you did it then."

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And then they went on to Sylvaine's speech.

It was during the third or fourth rehearsal that Wilner had felt his interest in the young actress, to whom he had given the secondary part of Esther, increasing. To begin with, Sylvaine was red-headed, and as Wilner had been red-headed before turning white, this slightly predisposed him in her favour.

He thought Sylvaine had a good figure, was attractive, and that there was some electric quality in her muscles and her voice. Moreover she reminded him of a mistress whom he had made suffer a good deal thirty-five years before.

"But she's still too acidulated; has much pretension and not enough technique. She's got everything to learn, but it's worth the trouble; one could make a real talent out of that girl."

He listened in silence for several minutes, studying what was personal and what was false in the actress's intonations and gestures, separating in his mind what was spontaneous and valuable from what was artificial and bad.

Then suddenly he rose to his feet and shouted in his deep, terrifying voice: "Now do it all over again. You're bad, acting like a pig! You haven't understood the first thing about it. You think you're playing it like a goddess but you're merely a fool!"

Sylvaine, who thought she was excellent and was expecting congratulations, turned towards him a face contorted with resentment. She felt humiliated at being treated like this in front of the cast. She was making ready to answer Wilner that this was no way to speak to a woman, and that it was the best means of destroying what talent she had and, moreover, that if she was bad, it was because the part was bad.

But Wilner was already climbing on to the stage by a little staircase at the side, and face-to-face with the old man before whom everyone trembled, stage-hands, stage managers, attendants, actors, decorators and electricians, Sylvaine felt as weak as a reed inside.

The stage seemed to change its proportions when Wilner was on it. The placing of the furniture, the distances between doors and windows, even the scenery, all acquired a sense, a purpose, a reality.

He began explaining, describing, miming the character of Esther Manguard, creating a family for her, worries, illnesses, basing his commentary at once on everyday observation and on psychological analysis. He moved from the chair to the sofa, from the sofa to the door, shouting vigorously, swearing, then suddenly tender, his arms extended, and, returning to Sylvaine, he seized her by the shoulders, turned her round to fix her in the exact position while shouting a broadside of obscenities into her ears. With his wide nostrils, the puffiness of his skin beneath the eyebrows, he was almost beautiful at that moment with a huge, violent beauty, beautiful as an ox leaning on the yoke to drag the cart

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in the field, beautiful as a rutting bull, beautiful as a woodman setting his axe to an oak, or a sculptor his chisel to the marble. Who was he limning at that moment from an invisible block of stone? Who was he moulding from the slime of his words? Who was he animating with his scolding breath? The fictitious Esther or the real Sylvaine?

There was a kind of melancholy about watching so much force and knowledge of human nature expended on the poor little character of Esther Maugard, who existed by right of twenty-four lines of not particularly exciting text, and who, having lived her twenty-four lines each night of a season, would doubtless rot for ever in the infinite cemetery of the theatre's minor characters.

But Wilner knew that in creation there is no such thing as an unimportant detail, and that in nature as much effort, care, research and experiment must have gone to the wing of a cockchafer as to the brain of a man.

All those present, stage-hands as well as actors, fell silent. This was one of Wilner's great moments. This man, who never stopped, in his conversation and in his plays, talking as a specialist in love, really knew the state of love only in these moments.

Twenty times consecutively the unfortunate Sylvaine, chivvied, bullied, dominated, her body exhausted and her head aching, had to repeat such a simple phrase as: "Oh no! I shall never again suffer as I have in the past!"

"Has no one ever gone off and left you, have you never been cuckolded?" Wilner suddenly shouted at her. "And haven't you?" she shouted back, furious and terrified. Wilner stood up to his full height and paused for a second.

"Well, yes, my child, once," he replied gravely. "And most fortunately! How valuable it has been to me! And, as you can see, it's being useful to me at this moment."

And then Sylvaine remembered that spring day when Gilon had come to announce that Gabriel was breaking off their relationship. She had had no love since that moment; merely a few adventures of a single night, which gave her no happy memories. She felt sad, lonely, lost in the world, and ended by saying her "I shall never again suffer as I have in the past" in a way which would have drawn tears from a full house.

"All right, that's not too bad," said Wilner concealing his pride and satisfaction.

Sylvaine, collapsed on the dusty sofa, her nerves taut, shaking her fine copper halo, said in a voice hoarse with tears: "Oh no . . . Oh no, Monsieur Wilner . . . I mean *Maitre* . . . if I act like a pig, if it's going to be like this every day, I'd rather give up my part."

Wilner shrugged his shoulders and muttered from his gargoyle-like lips: "You know what father Jules Lemaître used to say: 'Actors are

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like trumpets. You have to blow into them . . . ' From time to time," he added, "there is a miracle: a trumpet that plays on its own."

And turning his back on the yellow light of the stage, he descended the little staircase, discreetly feeling his pulse to discover whether he had overtired himself.

A few moments later Edouard Wilner, a curiously battered soft felt hat on his head, and enveloped in a huge pale-brown coat lined with beaver, was making his way out backstage.

"Has Mademoiselle Dual left?" he asked a dresser.

"No, Monsieur Wilner, she's still here." He pushed open the door of the dressing-room. Sylvaine, sitting at her dressing-table, her hands to her hair, started when she saw Wilner's reflection in the looking-glass.

And the reflection said: "Will you dine with me tomorrow night? We'll go to the Tour d'Argent. Do you like the Tour d'Argent? Good, my chauffeur will pick you up at eight o'clock."

V

Next day the chauffeur called for Sylvaine at the agreed hour and installed her in the back of the car, surrounding her with as many precautions as if he were taking a fragile virgin to the sacrifice. He spread a fur rug over her knees. The evening was warm; Sylvaine gestured with her hand that she did not require it.

"Yes, yes," the chauffeur insisted, "Monsieur told me to give Mademoiselle the rug. And he also told me to give Mademoiselle this."

And he handed Sylvaine a particularly beautiful rose, just one, wrapped in crisp paper, and with too long a stalk to make it possible to, pin it to her dress.

Edouard Wilner's voice seemed to have set its mark on his servants; the chauffeur spoke with the same slowness as his master, and the orders he had received seemed to have invested him with some fraction of the supreme authority.

The young actress, her knees warm, finding no other use for the single rose than automatically to breathe its scent, visualized her entry with the dramatist into the restaurant whose windows gave on to the Seine. Twenty people would turn their heads, there would be whispers: "There's Wilner! . . . Wilner! . . . Who's he with? . . . Dual, his actress." Twenty people who tomorrow would tell two hundred others in Paris.

Sylvaine felt a sort of nervous current of slightly anxious joy. This dinner was a stage on the road of her dreams, towards the day when her name would be murmured first and she would leave behind her that wake of whispers which great actors, at the height of their fame, are privileged to share with boxing champions, Prime Ministers and a few writers.

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She also wondered what attitude she should adopt to make herself interesting to Wilner and please him to her advantage. Should she play the intellectual, or the society woman, or the despiser of men, or the romantic, or the actress with no other passion but her profession? The last attitude seemed to her the best. But Sylvaine did not feel very sure of herself.

The car came to a stop in the Avenue Henri-Martin; the chauffeur invited Sylvaine to get out, and led the way into a big pillared hall. A stern porter, sitting like a ministerial porter in a fine glass lodge, watched the young woman go by. A slow rococo lift, painted in pale cream and shaped like a sedan chair, took her up to the second storey.

A manservant in a white coat opened the door and silently led Sylvaine through dimly lit rooms with sliding doors, whose furnishings she could only grasp in fragments: huge marble heads copied from the antique, old red and gold chasubles lining the backs of display cabinets, modern chairs, tall old books.

Sylvaine, more and more intimidated, moved onwards, carrying the rose by the stalk.

The ecclesiastical light and the silence reigning over the apartment, the secrets of the universe which seemed to be sleeping beneath the worn leather of the bindings, the sacerdotal ornaments, the still faces of the dead gods, and above all the doors that closed mysteriously behind her, gave Sylvaine the impression of walking through the successive halls of an unknown temple, from which she would never be able to find her way out alone.

The manservant opened a last sliding door to reveal the brilliantly lit holy of holies.

The old, live divinity, whom the town revered, rose from his desk and came forward with the grace of a minotaur to greet the new offering life had sent him.

Wilner was wearing a big dark-green silk jacket which showed off to advantage the whiteness of his short curly hair and his neck like a sacred bull's.

"Ah, there you are; excellent," he cried. "This is how I wanted to see you make your entrance. Women should always carry flowers in their hands. But that's no reason to waddle because you think it makes you look as if you were walking like a princess. Leave your bottom where nature put it, and you may have some chance of looking like an infanta."

The room was Wilner's bedroom. Beside a vast low divan bed, covered with soft furs, and somewhat strangely arranged so that you reached it, as it might be a throne, by two circular steps, a bedside table was laden with medicines, pill-boxes, bottles, tubes, droppers and inhalers of every kind. There were gauze and iodine for the least

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scratch, a sort of porcelain eggcup for eye-baths, and remedies for every organ, every gland and all the viscera.

A log was burning slowly on the hearth, adding its scent to the gentle warmth of the radiator. Loading down the great desk were manuscripts, typescripts, piles of notes arranged in different-coloured files and alphabetical portfolios with all the order and precision of an expert accountant.

Sylvaine noticed at once that dinner was laid for two people on a bridge-table.

Wilner had for a long time been analysing the way women walked, and made a particular point of distinguishing between two methods common among prostitutes.

"There are those," he said, "who waggle their behinds, making their bottom move from side to side like small boys changing their chewing-gum from cheek to cheek; and then there are others who have a prim, stiff little clap-stricken walk and stamp their feet into the pavement..."

Then he suddenly asked: "Where do you want to dine, at the Tour d'Argent or here?"

"Really... I don't know, *Maitre*... It's for you to..." replied Sylvaine, quite unable to reply as she looked towards the bridge-table.

She at once blamed herself for her lack of audacity, and remembered that this was the way she had lost the chance of being given some very handsome pearls the day she had met Lucien Maublanc. "I shall clearly always commit the same stupidities," she thought.

"Don't call me '*Maitre*' so ceremoniously, as if I were the family lawyer," said Wilner. "Call me Edouard, as all my real friends do."

Then, having crushed her with the privilege, he went on: "Splendid, you're quite right; we'll dine here. It'll be much nicer."

He at once rang the bell and ordered dinner.

"Turn the lights out in the other rooms," he added.

Sylvaine realized that it had never been Wilner's intention to dine elsewhere. The meal was ready and composed of dishes which took some time to prepare.

She made the best of her bad luck and, putting her disappointment aside, resolved to carry out the second part of the programme she had dreamed up for the evening: to discover how to interest, intrigue and fascinate Wilner.

But he scarcely allowed her to talk. He was in mortal terror of people who came to him and said: "You know, my life's really a subject for a play."

And he feared that Sylvaine was one of them.

He much preferred talking himself, producing old-fashioned platitudes, paradoxes of fifty years ago, which today had become truths, as for instance: "Youth is not the age of happiness." He knew how to buoy up aphorisms which had done much sailing in their time, and

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keep them effortlessly afloat, and he added: "Old age is the happiest time in one's life. A pity it lasts such a short while."

He did not require other people to talk about themselves. As far as he was concerned people revealed themselves more clearly by their reactions to his own monologue. Concerning Sylvaine he said to himself: "This girl will either finish at the Comédie Française (they put on such bad plays there!) or keeping a night-club, because late in life she'll fall in love with a hotel commissionaire or a chef, and we shall go to a *boîte* (or rather others will!) called 'Chez Sylvaine.' No, I think the Comédie Française more likely; she's too concerned with her own future; she's an egoist!"

And as he thought, he measured into his glass twenty drops of a tonic intended for pregnant women, and set out ready on the tablecloth two pills of a stimulant which he would take after the roast, and whose effect would be balanced by a sedative tablet.

Sylvaine took advantage of a silence to bring out one of the flatteries she had prepared, and said that she was astonished that Wilner was not a member of the Académie.

"What on earth for?" he cried, sitting upright in his chair. "Do you think I haven't worked enough for the French language without having to go and spend my Thursdays recopying the dictionary? What more could it give me? I repeat, I'm wonderfully happy," he went on, spreading out his arms. "Look at me, my child. I've got everything. I do my work. I have no difficulty in being the greatest dramatist of my time; indeed, I'm the only one. Each one of my plays builds an edifice to survive me. I have my own theatre; in my stalls I watch the intelligent, the rich, the stupid, the poor, the young, the old, the innocent and the blasé applaud me. From time to time I have the pleasure of discovering an actor with a talent which I can hew from the rough stone and impose on the idiot crowd..."

These last words of Wilner's sent a wave of hope through Sylvaine's breast.

"Besides," said Wilner in a hollow voice, lowering his face towards his plate, "they would never have had me because I'm a Jew."

"And yet, Porto-Riche?"

"But Porto-Riche didn't embarrass them; his was a minor talent!"

He seized a toothpick and worked with it for a little.

"You'd really have preferred to dine at the Tour d'Argent, wouldn't you? No, really? Of course, the Tour's very good, but it's very expensive and I find that demoralizing. What was I saying... Oh yes, that I'm very happy. And my greatest, my most profound source of joy, is the happiness I have given women... All of them, do you hear me, all of them..."

Sylvaine felt Wilner's knees enclosing hers under the bridge-table. "And why is that, my child?" he asked with false ingenuousness.

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"They all go on writing to me, 'Dear Big Edouard,'" he went on, "and giving me presents and hoping for the day I'll take them back. Do you see this gold watch? A woman gave it to me last week. Well, I've got ten watches like that in my drawer. I could almost set up as a watchmaker."

He drank some wine and went on: "And as far as I'm concerned, there's not a single woman I've slept with about whom I don't remember everything, the smell of her armpit, her cry of pleasure, the texture of her flesh..."

"What you're saying now is not very kind to me, Edouard," said Sylvaine, avoiding his eyes and twisting up the corner of the tablecloth.

"Ah, jealous already, eh?" Wilner thought.

"Don't you remember, with your wonderful memory, in 1922?"

"In 1922!" Wilner asked. "You mean we... slept together?"

Sylvaine quietly nodded her head.

There was a momentary expression of doubt in Wilner's eyes. "Is she pulling my leg?" Then the expression changed to anxiety, almost to dismay.

"I haven't dared remind you since you engaged me," said Sylvaine. "I thought it more discreet. But all the same I thought... Of course, I was only a girl!"

"Wait... wait... Yes, of course, it's true, I've got there now," Wilner said. "We met in a night-club and I took you home in a car, isn't that so? And it was you who said: 'Oh no, serious business, please.' You wanted to have a child and couldn't succeed... I wanted to give you pleasure... But I thought that you knew nothing about love. Serious business is within anyone's reach... So it was you? What can you expect, you've grown up so much, you've grown so beautiful... Oh, no, this is really the first time..."

At that moment his butler came in, saying: "Monsieur is wanted on the telephone: Monsieur Lachaume."

"Oh, yes, put him through," replied Wilner, delighted to seize the diversion.

And he went to the telephone thinking: "That's very extraordinary. It really is the first time that such a thing has ever happened to me."

"Good evening, my dear friend and deputy..." he said. "Yes, thank you, very well... dinner Friday week? Where?"

Wilner quickly put his hand over the second receiver to smother the twanging.

"Yes, yes, I like the place very much," Wilner replied. "It's very pleasant. Black tie. Who'll be there?... No, the women? Our dear Marthe, of course, and who else? Princess Torreggiano, yes, excellent... Inès Sandoval, the poetess, yes..."

At the same time Wilner was writing down the names on a pad.

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"Very well that's understood, my dear friend, Friday at eight o'clock, for sure," said Wilner and hung up.

"The little Sandoval, yes," he thought, "I've never slept with her." He went to a little wooden file containing a card-index, looked among the cards, and brought out one with the letter S. He read:

12th December 1908. Dined with the Duchesse de Giverny. The little Sandoval, 20, has just married Jules Sandoval. Pretty, intelligent, dark. Wearing a sea-green dress and a necklace of topazes. Told her not to wear ear-rings, that ears were intended to be naked...

The card had another entry, dated 1913, and still another in fresher ink, dated 1924. The old seducer kept in his wooden box notes on nearly eight hundred women who either had or had not been his mistresses, notes which covered half a century of Parisian and European life.

Before going out to dinner in Paris, having always carefully enquired who the other guests were to be, he consulted his card-index. And Friday week, after coffee, he would lead Inès Sandoval into a corner and his gargoyle-like mouth would pour over the poetess the quasi-miraculous water of his carefully preserved recollections.

"The first time we met," he would say, "was at dear Cécile de Giverny's, yes indeed. Yes, twenty years ago, my dear. You were wearing a sea-green dress, as soft as seaweed. Yes, of course I remember! How could I forget? And I was profoundly disturbed by your ears. And you were kind enough to take off for a moment the wonderful jewels you were wearing so as to show me jewels still more marvellous yet..."

Few women were able to resist the intoxication of such homage. Conscientiously Wilner looked under the letter D. He found the records of several dead women. But nothing about Sylvaine.

"There, that's what comes of despising girls who aren't duchesses," he thought, furious with himself, as he returned to the table.

VI

Dinner had been cleared away, the bridge-table folded up, and the butler had disappeared into the depths of the temple. Only the occasional passing of a car in the street reminded Sylvaine of the proximity of her fellows.

Wilner took her hand, and suddenly said pathetically: "My child, I need you. You must help me to commit suicide."

In his deep voice he wove a net of thick ropes about his prisoner, sometimes using the shuttle of happiness and sometimes that of despair, groaning of his excessive fame and the genius which condemned him to

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eternal solitude. He set all his traps, so as to give himself the illusion that he was out to capture a difficult prey.

"Besides, they always like it if one pretends to be taking pains to capture them," he thought.

A few moments later he said: "But before I die I shall astonish them all. I shall write a *Moses*, which that ass Chateaubriand failed to do. It will be my only really autobiographical work."

His method of seduction was to talk about himself. He was not afraid of exaggeration or ridicule. Nor was he loath to manifest the various facets of his character and the resources of his mind to someone whom in his heart he despised and who was clearly incapable of appreciating half of what he said. He played up his personality for his own pleasure, and Sylvaine was the indispensable audience of the thousandth performance.

"One more who will remember and be able to say that she has seen Wilner without his protective colouring, one more who will propagate my legend."

And indeed Sylvaine could not help being fascinated by the monstrous vitality of this being who, as the hour grew later, seemed to become ever larger and more imposing.

There were moments when, looking at Wilner, one was no longer sure whether he was like those infinitely ancient experiments of nature, those creatures half-man, half-animal, whose memory was preserved by the religions before Israel, or whether he represented a new essay, a new and uncompleted prototype, halfway between man and God.

Sylvaine had completely forgotten the personal hopes she had built on this dinner. She submitted to the dominating presence.

"He'll do what he likes with me," she thought. "But can he in fact do anything at all? Does he even want to? Or is all this nothing but bluff?"

Half from curiosity and half from a desire to regain ascendancy over herself, she got up and said: "It's late; I must go home."

Wilner's expression became one of real anguish. He seized Sylvaine's wrists.

"No, no, you can't leave now," he said. "We're only beginning to understand each other. You're not happy either. I know it, I can see it. Believe me, this is the moment. You must not break the rhythm."

Wilner's voice took on a deeper tone, at once demanding and suppliant.

"I shall make you experience the most marvellous things," he went on; "the last time you were too young, you could not understand who it was you were making love with. But you cannot have been happy, since you do not know what it means to be loved by me."

When Wilner's remarks of this nature were repeated, everyone

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laughed. But a woman to whom a declaration of this kind was made after midnight could not help feeling, though she might join the mockers on the morrow, either hope or terror at the actual moment.

"And I'll make a great actress of you," he murmured.

"As long as the little idiot doesn't go away," he qualified to himself. "I've gone to too much trouble over her; I'm a fool. I should have put things to her more crudely."

He knew that if she went he would hate her; he knew that he would feel humiliated, ridiculous, because of his gratuitous performance; he knew, too, that he would spend half the night taking his pulse, reproaching himself for having drunk too much, talked too much and become too excited. He would listen to his heart beating in his chest, would anxiously note the rhythm of his digestion, so mysteriously governed by his nervous system, and yet at the mercy of a poison, a shock, or the mere travail of the years. What unknown forces regulated the movements of the cardiac muscle? One moment of inattention on their part would induce its sudden stillness and silence.

If "this little idiot" insisted obstinately on standing by the door, gently shaking her pretty red curls, and saying: "No, please, Edouard, really . . ." Wilner knew that he would be listening to the presence of life in his thorax till the dawn.

Obsessed by the miseries of his fleshly covering, agonized by its fragility, burdened by the all too precise thought that his enormous body was no more than a complicated mass of flaccid cells, viscous liquids, diversely coloured, and tiny holes in tissues which were slowly and continuously putrefying, he would not have any other resource for the alleviation of his insomnia and his fears than the mental tabulation of the lists of his mistresses, year by year, and the addition of Sylvaine's name to the year 1922. And when at last the first gleams of daylight filtered through the chinks of the shutters, then the sleeping-pill, taken too late, would begin to take effect on the mysterious viscera.

Wilner looked at the clock. He would have to wait six whole hours before the first grey light appeared in the sky.

"You're not going to refuse an old man," he said, falling on his knees as a last argument.

But Sylvaine, whom he had persuaded to come back across the room, was already sitting on the edge of the bed.

He insisted that she should undress slowly, pretending to instruct her in interminable preliminaries, as he rubbed his face all over the young actress's body. He was now grateful to her for the moment of emotion she had caused him by pretending to refuse. It was all right; she had played the game properly and enabled him to look on her and seize her as prey.

Sylvaine, lying on the furs, was half-suffocated under Wilner's

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weight, while the pharmaceutical smells from the bedside table assailed her nostrils.

She was clever enough to pretend to sensual pleasure; she was even imaginative enough to feel it in reality, by the fact of "knowing whom she was sleeping with."

Meanwhile the old minotaur, feeling the body quivering beneath him as he took it with calculated slowness so as not to have to perform a second time, nevertheless did not stop thinking. His thought was seeking in chilly altitudes, where Sylvaine had no more importance than an insect beneath the sole of his shoe, the resolution of a perpetual problem.

"Why, why should only the act of love appease physical anguish?" he wondered.

VII

On the eve of the feast of Saint Hubert, that is to say the 2nd November, All Souls' Day, the Marquis de La Monnerie sent for Laverdure and his wife in the afternoon.

Léontine Laverdure—the huntsman's nickname extended to his wife and his three sons and his surname of Bouillot had been almost forgotten—Léontine Laverdure was a swarthy, scolding little woman whose eyelids ceaselessly fluttered like an insect's wings, and who berated her husband on every possible occasion. It must also be said that she similarly berated the Saints of Paradise and God himself in her prayers.

"Well, Laverdure, so tomorrow you're going to take your two-thousandth stag?" asked the Marquis.

"Must hope so, Monsieur le Marquis, must hope so," replied the huntsman. "To fail to kill Saint Hubert's stag would be very vexing. It has only happened once in the thirty-nine years I've been with the hunt, Monsieur le Marquis will remember, the year after the war, when the hounds were naturally out of hand... Yes, the two-thousandth; it's really quite something..."

Laverdure nodded his head and allowed himself to give way to the thought of the past, the feeling of the years that had gone. He had followed the profession he loved, lived in contact with the trees and the forest, occupied in his world the place to which he felt he had a right. He knew that from Artois to Guyenne, and from Poitou to Morvan, important gentlemen said: "Laverdure of the Mauglaives Hunt? He's the best huntsman in France." He had ridden fine horses, proudly displayed his yellow livery in the villages, taken stags in the presence of Princes and Royal Highnesses. He had had the best and most revered of masters; he had shared his life with an excellent wife whose scolding was no more than the daily music of her admiration and her love; he had three sons, all in good health, in modest but honourable jobs, one of whom was already a father in his turn.

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"All in all, I've been a happy man," he thought.

All this was implicitly represented by the two-thousandth stag, of which he spoke so often and which, from week to week, he saw drawing nearer as a goal, an apotheosis. "It's getting nearer, Monsieur le Marquis; one thousand nine hundred and eighty-eight," or again: "You see, Léontine, only six more now..." And now the eve of the great day had arrived.

The fact that the hazards of the chase, the length of the frosts, the early or late arrival of the warmth of spring, the cunning of the hunted beasts, the perseverance or lack of it of the hounds, the fact that all these imponderables, these unforeseeable factors, should have conspired to make this particular hunt coincide with the feast of Saint Hubert seemed to Laverdure to be a symbolic connivance on the part of fate.

He knew, too, that he could not go on hunting much longer.

"I'll take another hundred, a hundred and fifty, and after that I'll still be able to superintend things if Monsieur le Marquis or Madame la Comtesse wish to keep me on, but I shall be too old to do a huntsman's job properly. I'm sixty-three," he thought.

"Well, Laverdure," said the Marquis, stroking his white moustaches, "I've sent for you and your wife because I wish to make you a present on the occasion."

"I wonder if Florent has told him that I want a washing-machine," wondered Madame Laverdure. "Or perhaps he'll give us money. In which case we most certainly shan't buy the washing-machine because it'll go into our savings."

"You weren't born in this district," continued the blind man. "You're getting on in years, and I wish you to have no anxiety concerning your resting-place on the other side. So I've decided to give you a plot in the cemetery."

Laverdure's face reflected the violence of his emotions; it turned scarlet, while Léontine's eyelids fluttered faster than ever.

"Oh, Monsieur le Marquis!" cried the huntsman. "Oh, really, that's too much! Nothing could have given us greater pleasure!"

"You have only to choose the spot in which you would like to be," said the Marquis. The huntsman turned to his wife. "As to that, Léontine, you must choose," he said, as if it were a question of some household convenience.

Madame Laverdure, wiping her eyes with the corner of her apron, and without her smothered sobs in any way diminishing the harshness of her voice, replied: "Oh, as far as that goes, wherever Monsieur le Marquis wishes. He's much too kind! Only if possible, it would be nice to have a place where our feet are in the sun."

The blind man automatically cleared his throat with a cough.

"And is everything ready for tomorrow?" he asked.

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"Yes, Monsieur le Marquis, according to custom," replied Laverdure. "Madame la Comtesse is looking to the church herself, with Monsieur le Comte."

"Which of the hounds are you going to put in the choir?"

"Well, I wanted to talk to Monsieur about that. There's no better-looking hound than Hannibal for Jolibois to hold. And if Monsieur le Marquis agrees, I'll take Valençay. Oh, for sure he doesn't look much, and it's not the custom to take an old hound. But a hound like that, as Monsieur well knows, one doesn't see three times in one's life. Those who know will understand. At twelve years old it's almost a miracle. It's his last season, and he won't completely finish it. He has trouble with his urine, and it's turning to uraemia or something of the kind. It would only be doing him justice."

"Very well, Laverdure, take Valençay. My youngest brother too . . ." said the Marquis, subsiding a little in his chair.

Whether it was torpor, laziness, or a decline, Urbain de La Monnerie was more and more inclined in his moments of fatigue to give expression to the curious associations that happened to cross his mind, while neglecting to explain them.

The Laverdures realized that the Marquis was tired; they withdrew and went to put on their clogs at the kitchen door.

While they were crossing the space which separated the château from their little cottage by the stables, Madame Laverdure, still snivelling, said: "Well, you see, Papa," (she had caught the habit of calling her husband thus from the children) "you see, Papa, we shall have our little corner of earth."

Laverdure was thinking.

"It had to do with the word *uraemia*," he said suddenly. "It reminded him of his brother, the General, who died of the same illness. And there are people who say that Monsieur le Marquis has lost his memory!"

VIII

The wooden roof was low and dark, the lead tracery of the arched windows kept out the light. Innumerable trophies of the chase alternated on the walls with the Stations of the Cross and supported garlands of holly. From the tangle of intractable foliage emerged the martyred arm of Joan of Arc, the plaster head of the Curé d'Ars and the halo of Saint Thérèse. Beneath the flickering glow of the candles the long horns, as if still worn by invisible beasts, seemed to be stirring as if on the point of breaking cover. And one might have thought that the whole church had been carved out of the forest.

There was a smell of November mist, incense and furs.

The nave was crowded, and latecomers had some difficulty in opening the door so as to slip into the back rows of the guests. Not at Easter,

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Christmas, nor at any other feast of the Church could the Curé of the little village of Chantou-Mauglaives boast of so large a congregation, or one of such quality. All the nobility and gentry of the countryside were assembled, its best-known faces, and the younger generation of marriageable age; three hundred people descended from the history of France, their names recalling battles long ago, famous portraits, the betrayal of Constables, duels, treaties, royal adulteries. Mingled with the local aristocracy there were a few important timber and grain merchants, two or three Parisian bankers, a famous lawyer with distinguished features who had, in his office, all the documents of the enrichment or slow ruin of nearly everyone present, and the Curators of Historical Monuments and the Waters and Forests.

In front of the steps of the altar the two huntsmen, standing firmly planted in their hunting-boots, each held a hound on a leash.

Old Valençay, his coat pale, his ribs showing, his back bent under a huge bow of black-and-yellow ribbon, his hindquarters trembling, released every few minutes a few drops of bloody urine on to the flagstones. The Curé was nervous; the hound gave him more anxiety than all the rest of the service, because he feared that the choirboys would start giggling.

"The boys are so stupid," he thought. "But the men are really not much more intelligent to bring a hound to mess up my church."

A group of horn-players, dressed in red, brought specially from Bourges, stood in front of the closed harmonium.

On each side of the choir, in the stalls normally reserved for ecclesiastics, the members of the hunt had taken their places, men on the left, women on the right. In their coats, whose colour had given the Mauglaives hunt the nickname of "the sun hunt," cut off at the waist by the carved oak screen, the members of the hunt looked like a series of those donors whose portraits are to be found in the bottom corners of old church windows.

Two Capuchin brothers, who had come to conduct a retreat, had been confined to a dark corner; over their spreading beards their eyes shone with curiosity and astonishment; they whispered ceaselessly to each other.

In the first of the stalls on the left-hand side, which was raised a little like a bishop's throne, the Marquis de La Monnerie sat motionless, his lids half-open to reveal his whitish irises, his tufted head leaning against the wooden back. At his side the obese Vicomte de Doué-Douchy—awarded the honour because he had been the representative in France of the late Duke of Orléans, the Pretender to the Throne—an old man with huge pale cheeks and a head which needed a ruff to set it off, was sleepily stroking his gentleman-at-arms goatee. Next to him was the handsome Gabriel De Voos who, from being a mere guest the season before, had now achieved the dominant position of nephew

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and active Master of the Hunt; then followed a row of members of the hunt with short necks, long noses, bony hands and irascible eyebrows, among which appeared the kindly round face of Commandant Gilon as well as the peculiar, hieratic, brick-coloured face of an immense Dutch baron, who knew nothing whatever about hunting and who had been up to the neck in whisky since ten o'clock that morning.

The row of women presented a series of three-cornered hats decorated with short feathers and gold lace, poised at different levels on the bluish-white hair of the Comtesse de La Monnerie, the ash-blond hair of Jacqueline, the black hair of her cousin Isabelle, the dull hair, above powderless faces, of several *châtelaines*, exhausted from having borne too many children, above the long face of Mademoiselle de Longue-boile, an old maid of fifty with the figure of a horsewoman and the hands of a man.

Gabriel was depressed. He felt embarrassed in his too-new clothes, whose brightness contrasted with the old coats that had been washed by the winter snows and the rains of March, faded by the sun, stained with sap and the sweat of horses, which all his neighbours wore.

Moreover, Madame de La Monnerie had found occasion that morning to say to Jacqueline in his presence: "How extraordinarily like François he looks dressed in those clothes; it's really astonishing! And indeed your first husband had the same taste for wearing that kind of disguise."

She herself hated hunting and appeared only once a year, for the feast of Saint Hubert, like a queen who submits to some obligation of the court.

Since the beginning of the ceremony Gabriel had not taken his eyes from his wife; he watched her with the tenacity of a jealous man keeping his eye on a flirt, as if he hoped to intercept some glance between her and Heaven.

"She must be thinking of him at this moment," he thought. "Here I am in the same stall; she's looking at me, and I'm sure she's seeing him in my place."

Church, no matter what church, was in any case the place where he most disliked going with her or seeing her go alone. For he knew without any doubt whatever that she there evoked the memory of the dead man, and on each occasion renewed a mystical conversation with him.

When Jacqueline had asked Gabriel, on their return from Italy, that they should have separate rooms, she had committed the error of giving him the true reason: "When you sleep beside me I can't say my prayers."

Which he had interpreted without difficulty as meaning: "Your presence embarrasses me when I want to pray for François." And he disliked all pious exercises, all religious devotions.

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Afterwards he was always ashamed of himself, but that changed nothing.

He saw the head huntsman approach Jacqueline deferentially to say something to her, and he watched her make a sign to her children who were sitting not far from the choir.

Marie-Ange and Jean-Noël came forward, holding each other by the hand to give themselves confidence, concentrating on following the instructions they had been given. Marie-Ange was slightly taller than her brother. Jean-Noël was very proud of wearing riding-breeches.

The two children genuflected as they passed in front of the altar, and went to the men's pew.

"Daddy, may I have your cap to take the offertory?" said Marie-Ange to Gabriel, while Jean-Noël made the same request to Commandant Gilon.

"Take it, take it," replied Gabriel with no kindliness in his expression.

The two children hesitated a moment over which side each should take, then with a piece of natural cunning Jean-Noël went to the side of the ladies while Marie-Ange took that of the men.

They moved slowly along the rows, collecting the notes and taking care to keep abreast. Their beauty, their youth, even their shyness were so moving in this assembly in which age and ugliness were so preponderant, that all eyes, all thoughts were turned on them, while the mechanical praying of the devout was arrested on their lips, and the indifferent ceased to relieve their boredom by counting the antlers on the stags' heads; and the silence in the church, broken only by the creaking of a chair, a cough, and the sing-song murmuring of the priest, became charged with a greater intensity.

While this was going on, Gabriel could not help wondering where Jean-Noël and Marie-Ange had been conceived, on the bed in the Avenue de Messine, or here at Mauglaives?

A choirboy rang the bell for the elevation. Then the two rows of donors fell on their knees in the corners of the windows, the men with a great clatter of boots, whips and hunting-knives, the women with their foreheads uniformly in their hands.

The horn-players in red, in front of the harmonium, passed their twelve horns over their heads, and put their twelve mouthpieces to their lips. And the church rang to the rafters. The notes ringing out from those scarlet breasts and projected from the brass coils floated on the air like fiery bubbles, rose among the candles and the arms of the statues, clung to the garlands and the stags' heads, only to return and burst against the ears of the congregation.

The horn-players' cheeks were as scarlet and swollen as those of angels of judgment.

"Go on, pray for him," Gabriel thought. "Ask God to forgive him

for having committed suicide, and to reunite you for all eternity, since that's all you dream about. I'm merely an earthy figure and what's more I've got no say in the matter since you pay my tailor's bills."

Jean-Noël had knelt down where he happened to be in the middle of the central aisle and, clutching the cap full of bank-notes to his chest, prayed: "O God, protect Papa's soul who was taken from us in an accident. And also those of Nungesser and Coli."

For, although there were still three hundred hunts in France, and an old blind lord still continued to have his hounds, his horses, his guests and his huntsmen blessed, the Atlantic, a year earlier, had been flown for the first time by Frenchmen. And for the last year Jean-Noël had included the unfortunate predecessors of Lindbergh in his prayers.

"And then, O Lord," he went on, "let me one day be the Master of a Hunt like Uncle Urbain. Though I shall be in any case because Mamma will inherit it from him, and then me afterwards. O God, let me be everything."

At the same moment Madame Laverdure was contenting herself with asking: "O God, try and find a way for my Laverdure to take his two-thousandth today, because if he misses this stag he'll be ill for sure. And he certainly doesn't deserve that!"

Heads were raised. Jean-Noël and Marie-Ange finished the collection and went to the sacristy.

A little old man with a vacuous, toothless laugh gave them the remains of the holy bread.

"Since your family provide it, it's fair that you should have it," said the sacristan, while the two children ate the little cubes of *brioche* among the surplices, chasubles and censers.

The service was coming to an end. The donors stepped out of their window and moved towards the door with all the slowness and dignity of a royal family emerging from a *Te Deum*.

The blind man came first; everyone gazed at him with respect. To guide his steps he used on one side a tall ebony cane, and on the other leaned lightly on his niece's arm.

With a final touch of style, permitted by his rank as Master of the Hunt, he had decided to wear that day, alone among the men, a large three-cornered hat; more than ever, with his arched thighs, his boots creased at the joints and his Louis XV clothing, he resembled his ancestors whose bones slept beneath the flagstones which Valençay had stained with a reddish puddle.

Everyone met on the village square, which was crowded with sports cars, limousines, English dog-carts and huge brakes. The morning was lit by a pale November sun; a cold little wind blew across the square: "a drying wind," the country gentlemen with the long noses said to each other. Among those present today many met only once a year, and indeed only came for the pleasure of meeting people, of seeing and

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being seen. Everyone immediately began making futile, meaningless conversation, conventional politenesses, or evoking common memories.

De Voos was introduced to a crowd of people whose names and faces he would never be able to disentangle. He was watched, studied, dissected, and felt that a sort of spiritual backbiting was going on behind him. He was one of the principal objects of interest that day. He was "the new husband of the little La Monnerie." Elderly people with watering eyes, who announced themselves as distant cousins of Jacqueline, came and shook him by the hand saying: "We're so happy for her!"

He was handsome, elegant, in his prime and attractive, enviable on all counts, and envied of all. His marriage had something fabulous about it. In the eyes of the young he represented a dream, in the eyes of the elderly a regret. No one could have guessed his unhappiness.

Urbain de La Monnerie, still led by Jacqueline, went slowly from group to group and occasionally, touching someone with the handle of his cane, asked: "Who is it?"

A thin elderly woman, wrapped in a grey coat like a branch in its bark, came up to the blind man.

"Urbain," she said, "I am Odile."

She had a soft, melodious voice and an infinite number of closely parallel, vertical wrinkles.

"Oh good, there you are! I was expecting you before the service," said the Marquis reproachfully.

"Monsieur Séjarry, who was kind enough to bring me, had a breakdown with his car," she replied.

The tiny lateral trembling which affected the Master's hands suddenly increased, and this was all the more noticeable because the elderly woman, who was called Madame de Bondumont, was also afflicted with a trembling, though hers, like her wrinkles, was vertical, and it shook her continuously from the shoulders to the knees.

Jacqueline discreetly let go of her uncle's arm; the people standing near instinctively moved a few steps away, and the nobility of the district found themselves making a circle, almost in an attitude of admiration, about these two old people who were exchanging words of no importance as they stood, face to face, shaking in opposite directions, one of them no longer able to see the features of the other, as they lived the last act of their long and respectable love-affair.

IX

The château of Mauglaives was built on a sort of natural terrace overlooking the houses of the village. Seen from this side, with the high-pitched roofs of its angle-towers and its flanking turrets, it gave the impression of a huge, sinister, medieval fortress, its sheer grey walls

pierced by narrow windows and low doors. The lawns covering the terrace, planted with a few great elms, whose topmost branches reached barely half-way to the slates of the roof, did but little to relieve the fortress's austerity.

But if one went round the building, the western façade suddenly burst on the eye; it was a famous façade, created by the genius of the Renaissance, and it made of Mauglaives not only one of the largest but also the most beautiful château in that part of France.

There was not a foot of the façade that was not ornamented and sculpted; not an angle that had not been transformed into a column, wreathed with acanthus, ivy and vine. The narrow mullioned windows, the open staircases haunted by ancient crimes, the loggias, the balconies encrusted with coats-of-arms, even the chimneys against the sky seemed to be clasped in a live embrace.

However often you visited Mauglaives, you were always subject to the same shock of surprise because of the contrast between the feudal, hostile, warlike mass of the back and this flamboyance and richness of art.

A wide space spread with golden gravel, from which the chapel stood back a little, formed the court of honour and lent proportion to the elevation of the famous façade.

The park, laid out during the eighteenth century in the English style, ran up to the court of honour. Its planned and variegated groves, disposed in cunning disorder across the plain, faded into the edge of the forest.

The lake, on a slightly lower level, reflected the clouds in its calm green waters between the bordering reeds.

Grouped round three sides, as if drawn up on parade on the gravel of the court of honour, the horses, the hounds and the members of the hunt were blessed by the Curé.

The whips held back the pack. The horses, still ticklish from having recently been clipped, pawed the ground; they were covered with the thick horse-blankets that were always used at meets and bore coronets or embroidered monograms at the corners.

"Now, Laverdure, make your report!" cried the Marquis.

Laverdure, followed by the second huntsman and two keepers, came forward and stood to attention before the blind man, cap in hand.

"Monsieur le Marquis," said Laverdure, "I think I've got a stag which I judge to be in its fourth season, in the Mallevoix wood. But I believe there are better reports than that today," he added honestly.

Jolibois, the second huntsman, a tall thin fellow, with one shoulder higher than the other and a black lock of hair falling across his face, had harboured a twelve-pointer "in a pocket handkerchief."

"He's close to the Great Ride," explained the second huntsman, "at the point where you come out of the Rond-du-Seigneur and go into

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the enclosure on the left; that's where he lies up. My tufter shows no other exit."

"Alone or with a herd?"

"Alone, Monsieur le Marquis."

The Marquis questioned the keepers. The first had a brocket near the Bordiers.

Finally old Planterose, a weasel-faced little old man with weeping eyes, who had been in service at Mauglaives for nearly sixty years, muttered from a toothless mouth: "I've got a wild pig at the Chemin des Fonds. I said to myself that if they haven't harboured a stag, it might be useful to have a pig. . . ."

The Chemin des Fonds was close to the cottage in which he lived, and the old keeper found it difficult to walk very far.

"Thank you, Planterose; that's very useful," said the Marquis charitably.

He reflected a moment. Laverdure, somewhat disappointed at not being able to report the best stag, awaited the Master's decision, hoping vaguely that he would be given the satisfaction of hunting, as his two-thousandth stag, a beast he had harboured himself.

"Well, Messieurs, what do you think?" asked the Marquis, courteously addressing the obese Vicomte, Gilon and De Voos, who were standing beside him.

Then, without waiting for their answer, he said: "Have you got the fumet, Jolibois?"

The second huntsman took the little black round droppings from his trouser-pocket and presented them to the Marquis's hand that he might feel them. Gilon, leaning forward, put on his spectacles.

"Very well, Laverdure," the Marquis decided, "you'll try Jolibois's mark."

"Very well, Monsieur le Marquis."

"And you'll lay the whole pack on. And I'm not saying that to make an impression," added the Marquis, "but because it's already late and you'd lose too much time whipping off your tufters."

"Very well, Monsieur le Marquis," said Laverdure.

And he thought: "In his place I should make the same decision. Between a fourth-season head and a twelve-pointer there's only one possible choice, particularly on Saint Hubert's Day. Besides, I sent Jolibois to the Rond-du-Seigneur," he told himself by way of consolation. "He works under my orders. It's really the same thing as if I'd harboured the stag myself."

"Julien!" called the Marquis.

The old Mauglaives coachman came up; he was leading a twenty-year-old mare by the bridle; her legs were tired and she had two deep pits, hollowed by age, above her sorrowful eyes.

"Monsieur le Marquis?" said the coachman, doffing his top-hat.

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"From now on, do you mind following me?" he said, angry and disagreeable.

"You were going so slowly," Jacqueline replied.

"Well, I couldn't knock over that great barrel of a Doué-Douchy to please you!"

"You only had to jump the ditch and cut across to the right, as I did. Anyhow, keep quiet, one can't hear a thing."

Jacqueline had no intention of wounding him; it was merely the excitement of following hounds. But though the basis of their disagreement was so slight, it was enough to set off Gabriel's obsession.

"I don't care a damn whether you can hear them or not!" he shouted. "You told me yourself that you always followed your first husband out hunting. I can't see why it should be any dishonour to you to do the same with me!"

"Oh, for goodness' sake! Don't start that all over again!" Jacqueline cried, her eyes bright with anger. "Even if I'd forgotten him, you'd make sure that I missed him. I used to follow François because I was ten years younger and because he knew about hunting, and wasn't merely content to put on a false air of authority that deceives no one."

For a moment they confronted each other with their eyes. Their faces were red, their foreheads and necks damp from the exercise. Jacqueline had no powder on her face, her hair was untidy and her three-cornered hat rather crooked, she was aware of these things under Gabriel's malicious, watchful glance.

"Very well! Hunt as you like, since you're so good at it," he said. "And when you break your neck, I shall certainly not be there to pick you up."

He put Commandeur into a gallop, spurring him with unnecessary violence. Jacqueline's horse wanted to follow; the young woman deliberately held him back as he pranced about the gravel of the road.

"A sergeant-major, that's what I've married. A parade-ground sergeant!" she thought, regretting that she had not told him so the minute before, and foreseeing with a sort of anxious satisfaction that she would say it at their next quarrel.

Gabriel went down the slope and then straight on along the road.

He had reined in a little, wondering where he was, when Commandeur lost a hind shoe. This tiresome but not unusual accident renewed Gabriel's anger. He now had to walk back with, at best, the hope of finding the cars, getting a lift in one of them, and handing his horse over to a groom.

For a quarter of an hour Gabriel swore that he would never hunt again, that he would leave for Paris that evening, get a divorce and rejoin a Spahi regiment.

It was then, crossing a perfectly empty field, that he met the huge Baron van Heeren who, as usual, had lost the hunt five minutes after

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the stag had gone away and had ever since been asking for information, preparatory to ending the day in search of an inn. Indeed, one wondered why he persisted in navigating, twice a week, like a ship in distress, the countrysides of Sologne, Berry or Sancerrois, when he might have found some other pretext for escaping from his wife and getting drunk in peace.

Delighted with the piece of good luck that gave him a companion, the Dutch Baron said to Gabriel: "Let's find a village where, perhaps, a smith can put a shoe on your horse. And meanwhile perhaps we could go to a café."

The Baron was so sodden with drink that it only took one glass of spirits to restore him to a splendid state of euphoria. At the second glass he became ridiculously confidential. He had too, in this condition, a sort of contagious friendliness, and Gabriel was angry, unhappy, fed up with himself and with life.

They finished one bottle of brandy, and began on another, while Gabriel's horse, which had long since been shod, stood tied to a ring by the door; then van Heeren, whose red face still preserved an expression of flaccid dignity, said: "When I get home perhaps I shall go to bed with the maid. She has plump thighs, you know, and my wife underneath, she hears, but she dares say nothing, because I tap her on the nose. My wife, you know, she's thin!"

And Gabriel, pursuing a monologue of his own, replied: "Yes, but she's your first wife . . . Well, you're her first husband. No, my dear fellow, you don't know, you simply don't know what it is to be the second husband of a widow!"

For many days he had needed this release, needed to admit the fact to someone, even though that someone was not listening to him.

They soon found themselves in perfect agreement that the world belonged to men, and that it was the greatest piece of luck that two men who understood each other so perfectly should have met.

It was only when they wished to blow a horn in the sitting-room of the inn, that they might the more closely resemble the cheap English prints on the wall, that the hostess advised them to go home.

"Such handsome, rich men," she said, as she watched them go. "How sad it is to see them destroy themselves like that!"

Van Heeren had taken the precaution of filling a large silver flask, which he shared with his companion on the way.

XI

Jacqueline suddenly realized how tired she was, how cold and sharp was the air, and how mournfully the November light lay over the countryside and the bare trees.

She heard a barking some way off, but it was only a farm dog, and

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it increased Jacqueline's feeling of loneliness. She thought how senseless and absurd it was in the first third of the twentieth century to spend hours following the slot of a stag, that little cloven print in the tilled earth and damp grass.

"That's what it is," she thought; "Gabriel's spoilt all my pleasure; what's more, he's made me lose the hunt. He'll be in at the death, and I shan't! I'll make him pay for it."

She took off her right glove and felt beneath her fingers the sticky damp of the reins, the crop and her horse's smooth coat. From a sandwich-box attached to her side-saddle she extracted a sandwich and began to eat it. Then she set off at a trot in the direction she thought, or rather guessed, to be the right one.

Why, she wondered, did she so dislike the idea of following Gabriel? It was not true that he knew little about hunting; she had only said that to wound him. In any case he rode extremely well.

Once again, it was because of the memory of François, out of respect for those closed areas of whose subtle limitations she was not herself altogether sure. And she recognized that Gabriel had some cause for jealousy.

"Indeed, am I not betraying him with François rather than François with him?"

François had also insisted that she should follow him out hunting; and she had done so in happy obedience, feeling that she was protected and preceded through life. She had but to follow his horse through fords, jump the hedges where his horse had made a gap. She could see him riding in front of her, standing up a little in the stirrups, the gold-embroidered skirts of his coat flapping in the wind. The mud thrown up by his horse's hooves struck her in the face; he was the master; she followed; it was wonderful.

She remembered the long hacks home at night, when they were dead-tired, but in ecstasy with themselves and their love. She could hear François's great laugh. And while the two horses walked on with slack reins, they leaned towards each other for minutes at a time, moving to the rhythm of their horses' pace, holding each other's hands.

"It's not very huntsman-like, the way we ride," François used to joke.

The nocturnal life of the woods, a rodent gnawing bark, a hedgehog moving through the grass, a rotten branch breaking suddenly from the parent trunk, surrounded them with its tiny, mysterious sounds, its vast, intoxicating smell of earth, mushrooms, wild animals and smoke . . .

Jacqueline felt like weeping. Why could she no longer, in similar places, at similar times, be happy in the same simple way?

She reproached herself with searching for buried joys among dead leaves.

Suddenly she heard hounds, then the horn, followed by the sound of the hunt-servants' voices on the left.

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"Hark in! Hark in!"

"Ah, the stag's turned back into the forest," she thought with relief, as if she had just been saved from some great danger; she set her horse into a gallop and rejoined the hunt with some dozen other members of the field.

"He's turned back towards Mauglaives! I think we'll take him, Madame la Comtesse, I think we've got him this time," cried Laverdure, doffing his cap.

And he galloped off down a big ride followed by the field.

Certain now of being in at the death, Jacqueline said to herself as she galloped along: "As a matter of fact François and I often used to be cross with each other out hunting. And then, afterwards, we used to laugh about it . . . So will Gabriel and I, of course, when we meet later . . ."

XII

Madame de Bondumont had spent a delicious, happy afternoon by the fireplace with the gryphons, exchanging memories and some regrets with her old lover, and then watching him doze. Twice she went to the wing-chair, stroked the hand with the cornelian ring, even carried it to her lips, then, shaking as if there were springs in her knees, went quickly back to her chair, for fear a servant should come in.

They had loved each other for thirty years, or rather they had been in love thirty years ago and had developed that sort of tender relationship which preserves the illusion of love in those who have passed the age for change.

Urbain de La Monnerie had become a widower as long ago as 1875. His young wife had died in childbirth, as had also the child. Urbain had then said: "Oh no, I'm too sad, I shall never marry again."

When they had begun their liaison, Odile de Bondumont had still been married. But even after the death of Monsieur de Bondumont, Urbain and she had continued to maintain a similar prudence, a similar perfection of discretion in face of the world; so much so indeed that, in thirty years, they had barely had as many intimate hours together as ordinary lovers require to develop hatred for each other in thirty months.

The age of impotence had come upon them, then that of infirmity; now they had reached the gates of death. And when Madame de Bondumont gently raised the blind man's withered hand to her wrinkled lips, and he pretended not to notice it, they felt the same intensity of emotion as the most passionately violent of embraces could have given them, because they never ceased thinking: "Let us savour this to the full; it's all that remains to us and perhaps it's for the last time."

The Marquis started up from his doze.

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"Odile, Odile!" he cried. "They're sounding the death in the park. I'm not mistaken, am I? Come on, come on, lead me there."

"But, really, Urbain, you can't go out without a coat!"

He rang the bronze bell.

"Florent! My three-cornered hat, my stick, my coat!"

Two minutes later he was hurrying across the park on his old mistress's arm.

"Don't go so fast," she said; "you'll tire yourself."

Jacqueline and her companions were blowing their horns continuously on the bank of the lake. The stag was standing in the water and the hounds swimming round him. The keepers and the château servants had come up at a run.

"Well, there you are, Papa," cried Léontine Laverdure. "You've taken your two-thousandth. You needn't have made such a fuss about it!"

"Charlemagne, untie the boat," ordered Laverdure.

And seeing the Marquis, he came to meet him.

"He's taken to the water, Monsieur le Marquis; he's taken to the water. It's a pity Monsieur le Marquis cannot see."

"Yes, yes, I see it, Laverdure. Well, I see it—back through the years. To bring a stag to bay in the Mauglaives lake, there's nothing finer. It's many years since that happened."

"And after a good hunt too! I shall make Monsieur my report this evening, on his box. And Madame la Comtesse, as usual, was the first to be up with him. Monsieur le Comte, on the other hand, who directed the hunt so well at the beginning—really one sees that his heart is in it and that he wants to take Monsieur's place—I don't know where he's got to."

He had put his teeth in again and looked younger.

Some of the cars arrived. Quite a number of horsemen, who had given up long ago, got out of them.

The Marquis was surrounded and congratulated as if it were some great victory or important family event.

"Ah, my dear Urbain, it's a splendid Saint Hubert's; you may well be pleased," said the obese Melchior de Doué-Douchy.

Everyone was delighted with himself and with everyone else and felt disposed to friendliness and compliments.

"Go on, Laverdure," cried the Marquis, "go and dispatch the stag. I don't like animals to suffer."

Laverdure got into the boat which Charlemagne poled out into the lake.

"Oh, my God, let nothing happen to him!" thought Madame Laverdure. She had seen stags upset boats at the death. But in those days Laverdure had been younger.

The edge of the lake was crowded with spectators. The long-nosed

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country gentlemen, having dismounted, had loosened their horses' girths and were rubbing their thighs, the reins over their arms. There was a long, tense silence in which nothing could be heard but the movement of the boat through the water.

The boat and the stag swam side by side for a few seconds like two ships running foul of each other. Then Laverdure, with his left hand, seized the stag by the tail and plunged his knife twice into its flank. The stag started up half out of the water and then fell back; his antlers were like spars on the surface of the lake and all about them the water turned red.

Laverdure, standing in the boat, doffed his cap while the horns sounded.

The ceremony of the death was held in front of the château, a few yards from the spot where the hunt had been blessed that morning. The dismembered remains of the stag were laid out on the lawn. Planterose, the old keeper, held the stag's head for some moments in front of the hounds' eager eyes as the whips held them back, then he pulled back the cloth, that is to say the stag's skin, to reveal the bloody heap; and the hounds leapt on it.

"Jacqueline! Gilon!" called the Marquis. "Come here. Tell me, who has deserved the honours? Who are the people here?"

"Oh, my dear Marquis," said Gilon, "today we have with us a very great Master of Hounds who would appear to have a right to them."

"Who's that?"

"One of the greatest Masters of Hounds. Isn't that so, Jacqueline?"

"Yes, most certainly," she said smiling.

"But, good God, who is it?" cried the blind man.

On a sign from Gilon, Laverdure, who had been warned, came up.

"Monsieur le Marquis," he said, "as this stag has been taken at Mauglaives and is the two-thousandth since I have been with the hunt, these gentlemen have thought that the slot should be offered to Monsieur le Marquis."

Jacqueline took her uncle's hand and guided it to the cap in which Laverdure was presenting the slot, while everyone raised their horns and sounded a fanfare.

"It's absurd, absurd!" muttered the Marquis, overcome.

Laverdure received the two-thousandth handshake of his career as a great huntsman, and the first that was really human, the first in which their palms had not been separated by a folded bank-note.

Then the Marquis pretended to be studying the stag's slot, feeling the horn, while Laverdure pretended to be cleaning the cloth of his cap.

"Tell me, is it a good slot, Laverdure?"

"Yes, yes, Monsieur le Marquis, it's a good slot."

"You've been a good companion, Laverdure," said the Marquis in a

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low voice. The *Mauglaives* call, echoing from the great Renaissance façade, was sounding over the roofs of the village and across the park, when two horsemen in yellow coats came trotting up. They were De Voos and the huge Dutch Baron.

The two horsemen, throwing their reins haughtily to a groom, slid from their saddles: then, their eyes vague, their step uncertain in their high boots, a sort of bantering complicity between them, they mingled with the crowd, bestowing silly, ironical compliments on the women. The Dutchman's speech was practically incomprehensible.

"Well," thought Laverdure, "there's the Baron been drinking more than he can hold again, and it looks as if Monsieur le Comte has been keeping him company. That's why they didn't rejoin the hunt."

When Gabriel saw Jacqueline, his face, which till then had been complacent and good-natured, assumed an expression of anger.

"Oh, so there you are!" he cried. "In the first place I insist that Julien be sacked. He isn't even capable of having a horse shod. Sacked, you understand! The whole place is in chaos. I'm going to run things on the lines of my old squadron. And get a move on them!"

"Yes, yes, all right. But for the moment I insist that you keep quiet," replied Jacqueline curtly, "because you're disgustingly drunk and causing me great unhappiness. I should never have thought you capable of getting into such a state."

"I'm not the least drunk," cried Gabriel. "And when I am, the women can just shut up."

Fortunately the horns were still blowing and drowned his voice.

"Dear me," he went on, turning ironical again, "why aren't they sounding the *Schoudler* or the *François*? They're neglecting their duties."

And putting his horn to his lips, he began blowing, much out of tune, *Le dix cors jeunement*, which had had ridiculous words put to it which everyone knew:

*Voici un beau dix cors jeunement
Il a tout du cocu.*

Had Jacqueline not been in public, she would have burst into tears.

Night fell, and with it came the cold. The guests got into their cars, or went and refreshed themselves at the buffet laid out in the château dining-room.

Jacqueline did not wish Gabriel to be subjected to this further temptation and sent him up to bed.

"Van Heeren, van Heeren, my friend, come and have a drink," he cried. "And to hell with the women!"

"If you really want to be taken for François's valet," said Jacqueline, "you need only go on."

When she saw Gabriel's expression, she feared she had gone too far.

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But she had attained her object. Through his drunken haze she had touched the one sensitive spot in her husband's consciousness. And he did not raise a hand to her.

The hero of the morning, whom everyone had admired and envied when they came out of church, now went off, his legs unsteady, his head bent, repeating to himself: François's valet . . . François's valet."

"Poor child," the guests whispered, "how terrible for her to be married to a drunkard."

Jacqueline drew Madame de La Monnerie into a little drawing-room.

"Really, Mamma," she said, "what am I to do? I can't go on living with him under these conditions!"

"Now then, don't dramatize things," replied the old lady. "He's drunk too much; it can happen to any man. Besides, what do you expect; he's a colonial!"

In the middle of the night, when all the château had fallen silent, Jacqueline, who had been weeping ever since she had undressed, saw Gabriel come into her room.

"Oh no, not that, not tonight," she cried. "Not after the way you've behaved. I shall never forget it. Never!"

But five hours of sleep had not succeeded in making Gabriel completely sober. He began insisting crudely on his grievances, dinning his jealousy into her ears, pressing his demands.

Then he got into Jacqueline's bed. She was unable to prevent him.

"A valet, eh? François's valet," he said, stripping her and getting on top of her. "Well, you shall see, you shall see."

He went on talking. The ultimate modesty ceased between them: the modesty of words. That night Gabriel taught Jacqueline the sensual excitement that is latent in obscene words. She did not dare—she never would dare—utter them herself. But she approved them, she solicited them with her hands and her body; she responded to them with hoarse, throaty cries; she felt them spread through her. She cried for mercy only when pleasure turned ultimately to pain.

Exhausted, terrified, ashamed and fascinated by this sin they had committed in the marriage-bed, Jacqueline, her eyes wide open in the dark, admitted to herself that she had never known such physical delight with François; and, from then on, she began making excuses for her second husband.

The Schoudler Crash

AT the beginning of the spring of 1929 there arrived in Paris a personage of whom the newspapers said little, who appeared in no salons, but whose presence, nevertheless, hung heavy over the town. He had hired a half-storey in the Ritz Hotel, giving on to the Place Vendôme; a telephone line had been placed at his exclusive disposal, and not an hour went by without a page-boy bringing him a salver laden with letters and telegrams. But the servants who cleaned his suite found never so much as a paper at the bottom of the wastepaper basket. He lived without women, except for a white-haired, Eton-cropped secretary, with a strained, intelligent, rather forbidding face. Men of diverse appearance and age, looking sometimes like personal bodyguards and sometimes like the department managers of big stores, visited him continually. In front of the hotel a car with opaque windows was permanently in waiting.

This personage, who was in a position to bring ruin to hundreds of industrial concerns and poverty to tens of thousands of workers, who could refuse the invitations of kings, foment South American revolutions, bring about the fall of European governments, who possessed a fortress on a Baltic island and, anchored at Trieste, the largest yacht in the world, who travelled with four passports, one of which was issued by the Vatican, and had been decorated with every imaginable order, was sixty years old and called himself Karl Strinberg.

His legend, which was current round the ring in the Bourse, in parliamentary lobbies, in board rooms, and even in the fashionable dressmakers' establishments during the presentation of collections, was composed of few elements: the yacht, the fortress, his huge Turkish cigarettes with gold tips, six inches long, which he smoked incessantly, the grand piano that was introduced into every hotel suite the day before his arrival, his quarrel with Pierpont Morgan, a few resounding crashes for which responsibility was attributed to him, and his absolute celibacy.

But when people asked about his origins, the answer was apt to be a vague movement of the hand towards the north-east of Europe.

No one could boast of having known him as a young man. It seemed improbable that this personage who moved about the world under the name of Strinberg had been born of woman; he seemed rather to be

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some mephitic incarnation who had emerged from the Scandinavian mists, wearing the lustreless clothing of the present century, for the purpose of accomplishing here below mysterious works of great corruption.

Very few people even knew him by sight, with his dome-like head covered with grey hair smarmed down with lotion, his rectangular face the colour of rice-paper, his pale eyes, his vacant glance, which was almost intolerable in its fixity and coldness, and his huge thin, red hands, the hands of a Byzantine fresco, that looked as if they had been attached to him by mistake.

At all seasons and all hours of the day he wore the same black glacé-kid boots, and he had a slight limp which, in a provincial magistrate, would have been taken for long-standing arthritis of the knee, but which in him might well be interpreted as the limp of the Devil.

But sometimes, towards the end of the day, when the sun was setting behind the Arc de Triomphe, and the cars in the Champs-Élysées were moving to and fro in a great haze of light, a diplomat, turning to look out of the rear window, would cry, with a mixture of vanity and foreboding, and perhaps also with a certain shame at entertaining these two emotions: "Ah, there's Strinberg!"

It was the hour when the financier was driven down to the banks of the Seine, towards Rueil and Bougival. In whatever capital he happened to be, he liked to follow the course of the rivers, those roads of abundance where factory-chimneys, the wheels of power stations, the cranes and lorries of docks alternated with slender, verdant islands, the parks of old houses, and the poetry of ancient villages.

While the car drove on through the freshness of the evening, Strinberg, motionless on the back seat, vaguely watched the landscape go by and dictated his letters to his secretary, who crouched on the little seat in front of him.

Then, in some restaurant by the waterside, he dined, saying not a word and drinking nothing but mineral water, while his secretary got quietly drunk on French wines and began to look, beneath her white hair, like a piece of bread dipped in violet paint.

Once back in the hotel, and protected by the barrier of silence created by the several empty rooms on each side of him, he opened the piano and, with his huge red hands, their thumbs misshapen and their nails white, played German music to himself, Bach and Mozart in particular, while the extraordinary calculating machine that resided within the dome of his skull performed its fabulous operations with the speed and precision of a mechanical brain.

This man, who, at any given moment, knew the rates of exchange of every currency in the world and could alter those rates with a single word, never carried money on him and never paid for anything himself. The secretary, or one of the guards, paid minor expenses.

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Wherever he might be, a bank paid his huge hotel bills. He never even signed a cheque.

Money, as universally and banally represented by bank-notes, or even precious metals, had no existence for him. He had far surpassed every ordinary notion of wealth. No more than Pyrrhus, Alexander or Charlemagne could sell their empires, could he contemplate "realizing" his business empire, for there was no one in the world rich enough to buy it.

II

Anatole Rousseau, Minister for the fourteenth time in his career, and now holding for the first time the portfolio of Finance, was preparing to leave his office in the Rue de Rivoli to go out to luncheon.

Having hastily dismissed his last visitor—"Goodbye, my dear friend; that's settled, you can count on me"—he glanced at the great boucle clock on the wall—"the one that bears the number 2 on Louis XIV's inventory," he thought whenever he looked at it—and decided that he was five minutes too early to go to his appointment.

Any other day he would have undertaken some task or other so as to arrive deliberately late and be able to mention the crushing weight of his duties as an excuse.

But on this particular day he contented himself with gathering up with his short little hands the few papers on his desk and allowing the five useless minutes to slip gently by.

"It seems he doesn't like waiting," he thought. "That, however, is no reason for being early."

He went to the window, whose sill almost reached his chest—for in spite of his specially high heels, he was very short indeed—and looked down into the famous courtyard.

Whenever he had a few spare moments in which to savour in solitude the high position he had attained, he took pleasure in imagining the courtyard of the Louvre filled with Musketeers, Swiss Guards, lords with rapiers at their sides, couriers arriving at full gallop, and he thought of the long line of wise, foolish and half-witted kings, nymphomaniac queen-regents, favourites and cardinal-ministers who had succeeded each other at that very same window, everyone of them concerned, as he was himself, with the destiny of the State and their own reputation.

"And when I am Prime Minister," he thought, "I shall take the portfolio of Finance, so that I may have this office. And I shall do great things."

Indeed for the last eleven years Anatole Rousseau had expected, at the fall of every government, to be called on to form a cabinet, and he had never ceased to be disappointed, nor still to hope.

"Ah, Dupetit," he said to a tall, bald, correct and still comparatively

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young man, who had just entered, "will you please put all these papers in my drawer and lock it. Of course, not a word to the Press or to anybody else concerning my appointment, you understand?"

Dupetit, his principal private secretary, inclined his bald head.

The two cars, that of the Minister and that of Strinberg, entered the courtyard of the Schoudler house almost at the same moment. In the hall the two men nodded to each other, but did not introduce themselves. Rousseau felt an immediate aversion from the financier, and a secret instinct warned him not to have any dealings with him. Side by side they climbed the great red carpet of the staircase.

III

Schoudler ate with his left hand and, when he was obliged to use his knife, made an unpleasant noise on his plate.

"When my wife Adèle, whom you knew well, my dear Rousseau . . ." he said suddenly.

He broke off abruptly, with an expression on his face which was at once amused and agonized, and no one could tell what he had been about to say.

"Well, Excellency, has Monsieur le Baron informed you of his proposal, which I support?" Strinberg asked.

Strinberg always addressed people by their most pompous titles, as, at the two extremes of society, do servants and sovereigns, that is to say those who have the greatest need to flatter other people's vanity so as to hold down their jobs.

The title "Excellency," which dripped into Rousseau's ear, diminished the instinctive antipathy he had felt towards Strinberg.

"Yes, partially," Rousseau replied to gain time.

During meals the Minister liked people to talk to him of things he already knew, so that he might enjoy his food in peace. As Rousseau swallowed down the pilaff of lobster, the canard au sang and the foie gras with truffles, at each mouthful of food, at each sip of the rare wines whose distant dates the butler whispered into his ear, he was reproaching himself. "I shall feel sleepy all afternoon, I shall be quite incapable of working. Oh, to hell with it! One only lives once," he thought. "I'll take a digestive tablet." And he gave way to the euphoria of the greedy. "Of course, of course, I ought to do as he does, he thought, as he watched Strinberg drinking nothing but mineral water.

However, Schoudler was explaining once again the matter in hand.

Ten years after the peace treaty a large proportion of the houses in the areas devastated by the 1914-1918 war still had to be rebuilt, and the State was far from having finished paying the annual compensation to those who had suffered the loss of their property.

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These people, by a clause in the Finance Act of 1920, had been authorized, so as to have the benefit of the whole compensation at once and thereby hasten reconstruction, to organize themselves into associations and, through the agency of certain banks, borrow from the public under government guarantee.

In practice the operation took place in the following way. A bank, which had previously been authorized—or was certain of being so—would drain off the compensation certificates in a given area into an association which it had either formed itself or been instrumental in setting up. Then the bank floated a loan for a sum equal to the total of the credits collected, on the guarantee of the State's annual payments, and these paid the interest and redeemed the principal.

The bank then paid over to the owners of the damaged property the sums due to them, but only on proof that reconstruction was in progress, and then by instalments, each of one-fifth of the whole.

It was a condition that the banks must always be in a position to prove to the representatives of the Minister of Finance that the work in hand tallied with the payments made from the capital of the loan.

The authorization could always be withdrawn if the bank ceased to appear sound, and it was then bound to produce immediately the funds it held.

At this time two associations, the most important that had yet been constituted, were in process of formation in the districts of Lorraine and Artois; the finance required for each of them would amount to more than a thousand million francs.

It was Rousseau's authorization for his bank to float the loans and administer the two thousand million that Noël Schoudler wished to obtain.

The giant launched out on one of his favourite themes: the building of towns and industries. He talked of the beneficent influence a great banker with bold ideas could have, thanks to these great associations for reconstruction, and of the new and necessary departures in architecture and town planning. Had not the banker's rôle in all ages been to inspire architects? Take the Medicis . . .

Some men, towards the end of their lives, appear to indulge once more in the amusements of their childhood, when, closing their picture-book, they pretended to be Caesar, Louis XI or Condé, threw their Marshal's baton over the neighbour's wall, or enclosed eight-year-old La Balues in basket-work trunks in the attic.

Perhaps men, in their secret hearts, never stop playing the game of identifying themselves with the famous, but only at the two extremities of their lives do they dare to do so in public; and the accessories used by the old are more dangerous than those of childhood.

Rousseau seemed rather irritated, but it did not occur to him to ask

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what game he had himself been playing an hour earlier at the window in the Louvre.

"Nothing great is ever done without the goodwill and intelligence of a statesman," said Strinberg, looking at Rousseau.

And the latter concurred with modest satisfaction.

Schoudler lowered his head thoughtfully towards the tablecloth.

"When Adèle, my wife . . ." he began.

And then he started and looked about him, as if it were not he who had spoken.

"Well, Excellency," went on Strinberg, "what do you think of this authorization?"

"But, my dear Monsieur," said Rousseau, "I think it perfectly feasible. Our friend Schoudler will draw up a proposal which will be examined by my department, with, as he knows, all my support . . ."

There they sat: the Nordic financier's eyes the colour of pearls; Anatole Rousseau's eyelids bird-like; the giant's glance a dark chink between the rolls of fat; Strinberg's hands red, like those of a third-century executioner, as they lay forgotten on the cloth; the Minister's little hands short, greedy and rheumatically; the Baron's hand thick and pointed, apparently kneading a ball of clay. The three men fell silent while the sweet was handed round.

Anatole Rousseau was an honest Minister and would content himself merely with some little operation on the Stock Exchange when he was certain that the Government was bound to fall. There could be no question of offering him a percentage, bribe or gratuity.

Since he could gain no personal advantage out of the business, Rousseau had no particular reason to hurry, except perhaps that of friendship.

"But why did Noël," he wondered, "want Strinberg present at the discussion of a question which he could have arranged quite easily alone with me. Perhaps it was to impress me, to show me that he has immense support, that he is on friendly terms with Strinberg, or perhaps, on the contrary, it is Strinberg whom he wishes to impress by my presence; yes, that must be it."

"You do understand, my dear Rousseau, that it is the associations themselves that are asking for the authorization for my bank in preference to any other," said Schoudler, looking instinctively towards Strinberg.

"Oh yes . . ." said Rousseau.

He was on the point of grasping the international financier's precise position in the matter and why Noël was so pressing and seemed to be in such a hurry, and then, the moment afterwards, he forgot what he thought he had divined. "I've decidedly eaten too much; and what's more, none of this is really very important . . ."

"Besides," he said, throwing back his fine white mane, "I must admit

to you that the Government's policy is not in favour of setting up new associations. The annuities weigh very heavily on the budget, and the State may be compelled to resort to a loan itself so as to meet them. The question is whether to do it or not and, if so, on what conditions?"

"Rousseau's on his guard . . ." thought Noël. "And I must not talk about this thing which does not interest them and which they cannot understand . . ."

The end of the phrase he had twice restrained himself from uttering buzzed in his mind like a wasp trying to escape from a jar.

The Minister, struggling against the torpor rising gently from his stomach, uttered a well-fed purr.

"Let's have our coffee in my study," said Schoudler anxiously, as he rose from the table.

Rousseau went out first, tiny on his high heels, his head held proudly on his shoulders, his colour high, and his stomach dilated beneath his waistcoat.

The three men entered the high room with the green-leather walls, which was the centre and the fortress of the Schoudler power.

"I haven't shown you my decorations," said Noël to Strinberg.

He led him to a display cabinet placed beneath his portrait in which, on fine crimson velvet, were spread out the enamel insignia, the ribbons and sashes of the most diverse and remote orders.

For the first time Strinberg seemed interested in something other than finance.

"Hullo, I haven't got that one," he said, pointing to a green-and-white cross. "Oh, I see you're an officer of this one! I've got the Grand Cross. And yes, of course, you've got the decorations of the old Austria-Hungary."

They were like two stamp-collectors, and one felt that at any moment they might begin swapping.

"Do you want my Saint Wenceslas? I'll give you my Green Dragon."

"Yes, and supposing there were no Ministers to award them!" said Rousseau, tapping Schoudler familiarly on the shoulder, to remind him politely that he owed him his promotion in the Legion of Honour.

"My dear Rousseau, a little brandy," Schoudler said.

Rousseau declined with a wave of the hand.

"You're wrong, my dear fellow. It's the 1811, and the last bottle."

"Oh, well, if it's the 1811 . . ." said Rousseau, with the look of a man surrendering.

It was the famous brandy that was always brought out on the great Schoudler occasions; it had been brought out for Maublanc. And now it was the last bottle.

Noël lifted the bottle carefully with his left hand, for fear that his right should let him down.

Rousseau received the glass between the palms of his hands, as if it

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were a frozen bird, and sat down in a great velvet armchair the better to sniff the precious liquid.

Then Strinberg gazed at these two puppets, the drowsy dwarf and the trembling giant, whom destiny had placed between his red hands, and said: "A little while ago, Excellency, you put forward the idea of a loan to cover the needs of reconstruction? If it were a question of a private loan, I should be ready to subscribe it." Rousseau took his nose out of his glass and a sudden glow made his face still redder. What? Strinberg, the man whom governments had been petitioning for months, the man from whom every Minister of Finance had hopes and awaited a miracle, was now quite simply making him a proposal . . . It was barely possible; it was too wonderful . . .

Strinberg made it clear that he was not making this offer to the French Government in general, but to Anatole Rousseau in particular. His Excellency was indeed the first French politician who had given him such an impression of intelligence and confidence for a long time . . . Rousseau did not dare mention figures, as if they would be an insult to Strinberg's unlimited resources.

"Indeed, indeed," thought Rousseau, "how wrong first impressions can be!"

He was already thinking of the power that the proposed loan would give him. On the strength of an agreement with Strinberg, he would become the indispensable man, the Messiah, the next Prime Minister.

"France will accept it with joy," he said, looking round at the display cabinets as if in search of something to give the financier at once. "We must see each other again, very soon," he added.

"Yes, I like my offers to be accepted quickly," said Strinberg.

As for the authorization for the Schoudler bank, a matter which merely required his Excellency's signature, Strinberg naturally expected that the signature would be forthcoming within the week.

Rousseau signified his understanding.

"The matter will have been arranged by the time of our next interview," he said.

Decidedly, Schoudler thought, Strinberg had genius. Two men of genius together, Schoudler and Strinberg; the associations' loans, the Government loan, great projects and great achievements . . . It was lucky, very lucky indeed, that Strinberg should have taken to Rousseau. "It was a good idea of mine to bring them together."

And suddenly the giant forgot to keep the little wasp-like phrase that was buzzing about his head under control.

"Well, this has been an excellent meeting," he said. "You know when Adèle, my wife, was going to have her monthlies . . ." It was out, he had said it; he felt at once relieved and embarrassed. Strinberg did not seem to know what he had been talking about.

Noël went on: "... she always had to put things straight; she tidied

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the cupboards, cleaned the silver. I used to tease her; I used to say: 'Ah, so it's the day after tomorrow!' Since she's been dead I've come to understand that women are instinctively tidier than we are..."

He was getting muddled. At the same time he felt a nostalgia for the past; and he wondered why it had seemed important to him, ever since the beginning of the meal, to speak of these things.

Rousseau had drunk enough, and was sufficiently pleased with himself, and with the others, not to be astonished at what Noël had said. He even used it as a basis for his wit.

"Well, Messieurs," he said. "I think that today we have tidied the cupboards of France."

IV

Towards the end of the afternoon Anatole Rousseau, emerging at last from the hazy torpor caused by his excesses at luncheon, looked at things with a more mistrustful eye. Schoudler, with his strange words and shaking hand, seemed to him to be extremely ill. Moreover, Strinberg's proposition had been very sudden. It was really quite impossible to know what was going on in those two men's minds.

Rousseau telephoned Simon Lachaume, and asked him if he could come to the Ministry. Simon arrived late.

"Ah, my dear Simon," said the Minister, "I wanted to ask you... one of your paper's photographers the other day, at a charity fête, took me among a lot of ballet-girls. It's very charming, of course... but, in view of present events and the important decisions I may have to make shortly, I'd be grateful if this picture were not published."

Though Simon knew from experience that Rousseau spent at least two hours of his valuable day reading what was said about him in the press, suggesting articles, suppressing others and flattering cartoonists, he was nevertheless aware that the Minister had not sent for him merely on this account.

However, so as not to waste the opportunity, he asked him to promote a government valuer in his constituency.

"Agreed, agreed," said Rousseau; "send the facts to Dupetit with a note to me and it'll be done."

Rousseau rose to his feet as seven o'clock struck on the boule clock—"Number two on Louis XIV's inventory," he said—went over to Simon, took him familiarly by the arm, led him to the window and gave him a partial account of the luncheon.

"My dear friend," he said, "I have completely captivated this personage who is supposed to be so unapproachable and before whom the whole world trembles. He swears by me alone; moreover, I gave him a precise review of the situation and, though I say it myself, an extremely brilliant one. I had no intention of asking for anything, but of

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his own accord he made overtures of which I cannot as yet say anything, but which are very, very considerable . . .”

He fell silent a moment.

“Look at that! How splendid, how magnificent it is,” he said, indicating the colonnade which was beginning to be filled with shadow. “Nevertheless,” he went on, “I should like to know what you think of our friend Noël’s position, at this moment, and what exactly is going on between him and Strinberg.”

“But I don’t know,” said Simon, at once prudent and sincere. “I merely run the *Echo* as an independent business, and have absolutely nothing whatever to do with the concerns of the bank.”

“Yes, yes, I know,” said Rousseau, “but Schoudler trusts you as he never has anyone else, even his son; try to sound him out a little about it. I’m asking you to do this in his own interests; and perhaps also in your own . . .”

Rousseau fell silent again.

“Strinberg has offered me a loan,” he added in a low voice, embarking on things he had said he could not mention. “As much as I want. I’ve only got to mention the figure, so you see . . .”

Once again vanity won the day over caution. Simon nodded his head.

“Ah, my dear Simon,” went on the Minister, smiling proudly as he raised his hand to the young deputy’s shoulder, “you were wrong to betray me! Yes, yes, I know very well what I’m saying. You should not have stood for any party except mine. You’ll lose time. With me there might have been an under-Secretaryship of State fairly soon. However, that too might be arranged.” Seeing himself already at the pinnacle of power, he gazed at his ex-protégé with some affection.

“Well, I’m counting on you,” he concluded. “But all this is between ourselves, you understand? You see what confidence I have in you . . .”

Simon left; and, reflecting deeply, went straight to Marthe Bonnefoy. She immediately telephoned Robert Stenn.

Robert, one of the “great friends” on the chimney-piece, was going to the theatre that night. He wanted to see, before the run came to an end, “the girl who was so highly praised and was Wilner’s new discovery.”

“In my opinion she’s affected and no good at all,” said Marthe. “Edouard seems to be lowering his standards.”

Stenn made an obscene joke at the other end of the wire.

“No, I said: ‘lowering his standards,’” said Marthe, bursting into laughter. “Robert, you’re impossible! So you’ll come along after the theatre? Splendid.”

Towards midnight Stenn rang the doorbell of the flat on the Quai Malaquais. .

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This old lover of Marthe's was a man with a high forehead and a dark skin. His rather slender fingers had large knots of skin at the joints, which became particularly apparent when he was holding a cigarette or writing. A famous advocate, a remarkable political tactician and several times Prime Minister, Stenn had a taste for general ideas and a wide culture which often gave him the advantage in debate at the Palais Bourbon.

His stiff cuffs showing, his body bent a little forward over a glass of well-iced champagne, whose bubbles he was beating into froth with an ivory swizzle-stick, Robert Stenn listened to Lachaume.

Marthe Bonnefoy gazed at the knots on her "great friend's" fingers with that tender melancholy in which the memory of an old love was secretly enshrined.

"Well, my friends, Rousseau's a fool, which I already knew," said Robert Stenn. "And you were quite right, Lachaume, not to stay in his wake."

Lachaume and Stenn used the second person singular to each other in accordance with Parliamentary custom, but with some embarrassment, and with certain subtleties; Stenn always addressed Simon by his surname, while Simon called him "President."

Marthe said that she could not understand how one man, even if he were Strinberg, could, on his own, lend France sufficient money to balance her budget and rebuild her ruins.

"In fact, it's Strinberg and yet not Strinberg," replied Stenn. "If the operation comes off, it will be done by the banking consortium under Strinberg's control, and of which Schoudler presumably wishes to become a part . . . You may take it for granted, my dear Marthe, that all capitalism depends in fact on two things: in the first place, what is called *control*, that is to say a factual situation which gives absolute power in a limited liability company to the man who owns only ten or fifteen per cent of the shares, because the remaining eighty-five or ninety per cent are spread out among thousands and sometimes tens of thousands of totally powerless people; and secondly, the ability of a limited liability company to own the shares of another company, and thus eventually to acquire control of it. A man like Strinberg does not possess the money he handles, nor the mines, the furnaces, the saw-mills, the warehouses and the banks, which constitute his power. He has control of them. He owns ten per cent of the shares of ten or twelve of the most important companies in Europe, which in their turn each control ten more, and so on . . . He's like a suzerain raised to the summit of a feudal pyramid. He could, if it so pleased him, mint money, print bank-notes bearing his effigy, and enjoy—indeed he in effect does enjoy it—the privilege of extra-territoriality. He's Lothair or Charles V in a hotel bedroom."

He stopped, looking at Marthe to see if he was boring her. But

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Marthe Bonnefoy had the talent of being able to persuade men that they had genius.

"It's pretty monstrous, all the same," said Simon. "Because in the last analysis this power rests on the small investor on the one hand and on the labour of thousands of workers, dockers, miners and so on, on the other."

"But of course it's monstrous!" said the President, shrugging his shoulders. "And that's why, if I were your age, Lachaume, if I were going into political life today, you would see me taking my seat, not in the Centre, but on the Left."

And he looked at Simon with that expression of indulgent reproach which men at the height of their careers sometimes bestow on the young who are not fulfilling those traditional duties of revolt which fall to the younger generation.

"However, don't let's exaggerate," continued Stenn. "We defend small savings in Parliament, of course; it's our duty and in our interest to do so. But in the abstract I only feel slightly sympathetic towards them. Capitalism has become the economic system of the timorous. It consists of hoping for a profit while spreading the risk as widely as possible. No lever to power has ever existed without some hand being immediately extended to seize it. It was fatal that adventurous men, indeed even adventurers, should have fallen into step with the horde of timid little punters. These, the people who want to grow rich without doing anything for it, or to preserve what they have without producing anything, are responsible for the notorious 'sharks' and the omnipotent financiers."

He got up and went to the chimney-piece and, as he tapped his portrait, said ironically: "I was young and handsome in those days."

Then he turned round, leaned his two hands against the green marble behind him and, his body bent a little forward, said: "That capitalism is fated to disappear cannot be doubted except by fools, because everything ends by dying, civilizations, nations, states, churches. All privilege, when it ceases to be the counterpart of a service rendered or a risk taken, ends by killing those who have it . . . but how much longer will it take? That's another story! . . . I had heart-disease diagnosed when I was thirty, but I'm still here . . ."

Stenn had a fine voice, a little self-satisfied, but warm and well modulated; he emphasized his phrasing. From where he was standing his eyes could see down into the neck-line of Marthe's frothy *deshabille*.

"God, what a lovely throat you've got!" he said.

There they were, in this refined, elegant, luxurious flat, these three people whose influence, actions and decisions had considerable importance for an empire of a hundred million people; they were intelligent, they knew the vices of their time, but did not dare push their thought

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to its ultimate conclusions, for fear of being themselves condemned by the society they governed.

Highly educated sextons, they were content to bury the régime, surrounding it with flowers that it might not stink too unpleasantly.

"To return to Strinberg," said Stenn, "people of that sort, of whom there are only a few in the world, surpass in my view the name of financier which is usually applied to them. Their speculations are comparable to the realms of abstract mathematics, formal logic, or despotism. And at the same time they obey a romantic conception of their own personalities. Do you not agree, Lachaume? . . . They're adventurers who have achieved dictatorship, but have risen too rapidly to found a dynasty, and are too much in love with themselves to desire it; superior to the law, enclosed in the contemplation of their own power, they lose contact with reality and tend to forget that their colossal importance is nevertheless based, as you were more or less saying a little while ago, on corn that must be threshed, metal that must be smelted, goods that pass from hand to hand, ships that may be wrecked or sail empty, on the labour of men and on their needs."

Robert Stenn had started off again. An impenitent talker, insatiable listener to his own words, with that professional failing of the bar, the political meeting and the tribune in the Chamber, he was always in process of composing some forthcoming speech.

Simon lost not one of the "President's" words; he was watching the workings of a mind which was more luminous and on a higher plane than his own, and was himself in the process of enriching the contents of his future speeches.

"And one fine day," went on Robert Stenn, "the real factors which these poets of finance no longer take into consideration, the saturation of markets, the uselessness of dumping, the reduction in purchasing power, the selling of produce at a loss, an unemployment crisis, a revolution, a scarcity in some part of the world, and also the jealousy of their rivals and the impatience of their subordinates, suddenly make the earth crumble beneath their feet and hurl them down from the top of their scaffolding of paper, rather as a bullet fired into a poet's head arrests immediately his musings on immortality. I have good reasons for thinking that Strinberg is close to a catastrophe of this nature, one of those collapses which make people say: 'But how on earth is it possible?' while all the time it was manifest in his destiny. He is in process at this moment of carrying out operations similar to those which succeeded at the beginning of his career. Why do you think Strinberg is so anxious that Schoudler's bank should get this authorization? Because he, Strinberg, and no other, is behind these famous associations, so that he may set up parallel co-operatives to enable him to dispose of the products of the industries he controls. You see how the thing works? But when a commander-in-chief takes personal

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control of his troops and undertakes a subaltern's job, defeat is not far off . . . Schoudler, for his part, rather late in life, and with his mind somewhat impaired, has suddenly decided he wants to play the part of a Strinberg."

Stenn stopped to empty his glass.

"If you want my advice," he concluded, "both Strinberg and Schoudler are in an extremely bad way, and each is hoping to save himself by means of the other, with this difference, that Schoudler is counting on Strinberg alone, while Strinberg is counting on six or seven Schoudlers. They'll collapse together, and that idiot Rousseau with them."

It was two o'clock in the morning; Robert Stenn, having lengthily kissed Marthe's hand, went downstairs, and Lachaume accompanied him out of propriety. On the quay, by the car in which the chauffeur had awakened with a start, the President said to Simon: "Go on, my dear Lachaume, go back to our wonderful Marthe. You need not have secrets from me . . . I'm delighted. She strikes me as being happy . . ."

Next day Simon Lachaume telephoned Anatole Rousseau to tell him that he believed, on the basis of a long conversation he had had with Noël Schoudler, that the authorization for the War Damage Associations would be as safe as the Strinberg loan.

V

In the office of the Deux-Villes Theatre Madame Létang, the manageress, was standing by Wilner and reading him long lists of names.

Wilner, leaning over printed plans of his theatre, listened, nodded his head and from time to time said a word.

"The Marquise de Gueuteville?"

"Two seats. Wherever you like, but better at the back."

"Baron Glück?"

"Oh, one seat, hardly that, half a seat. He's so small. A gangway seat! And then only if all the critics have been catered for. In any case, whether he's invited or not, he'll come."

The play in which Sylvaine Dual had played the small part of Esther Maugard had come to an end. Another, *Vitriol*, was to succeed it, in which Sylvaine, this time, had a leading part; and Wilner was in process of arranging the seats for the dress rehearsal.

It was a delicate operation, to which he gave as much thought as to the setting of the play. No one knew how Wilner organized the placing of enthusiasts at various points in the auditorium, put lovers beside married couples, pretty women in the front row of the dress circle, and above all—above all—paid particular attention to the editors of newspapers and the important critics.

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Madame Éterlin? I wonder why she's under the Ls?" said Madame Létang.

"But, of course, because she was the mistress of La Monnerie, and then afterwards of Lachaume. She's of no interest; cross her out. She's no longer anyone's mistress."

He sat up, spread out his arms, and said: "*Sic transit* So passes the glory of the unclean! . . . And you can cross out Madame de La Monnerie also," he added. "Yes, certainly! She's old and deaf. Our three rows of deaf people are already full."

With every play Wilner put on a few names were struck off the lists, "sent to the cemetery before their deaths," he would say, while a number of new names, "the rising lights," were added; from these lists one could easily have traced the fluctuations of celebrity through forty or fifty years of Paris society.

"Oh, while I think of it," continued Wilner, "Baron Schoudler has told me that he's bringing Strinberg. It's an event; it appears that Strinberg has never been to the theatre in his life. Give them the right-hand stage-box. They won't see very well, but everyone will see them."

At this moment Sylvaine came in, tense, nervous, happy, wearing a blue jacket trimmed with silver fox. She was in a considerable state of excitement over her first big part.

"Oh, Edouard darling," she cried.

A cold, ill-natured glance from Wilner rooted her to the spot.

"Forgive me, *cher Maître*," she said sketching a curtsy, "how many seats are you giving me for my friends?"

"None. None at all."

"What?" she cried.

"None at all!" repeated Wilner. "I don't need your friends; it's they who need me."

"Oh yes! And you need all your old mistresses."

"Calm down, calm down," said Wilner in a voice presaging anger. "There'll be at least ten men you've slept with in the theatre, if that gives you any pleasure. And that's a conservative estimate . . ."

"Swine," muttered Sylvaine, managing to stifle the word between her teeth.

But there was more admiration than resentment in the muttered insult, and even a sort of tenderness which is not incompatible with hatred. Whenever she proved refractory, Wilner crushed Sylvaine with a blow of his paw, and she wanted both to bite him and lick him.

At this moment the theatre gossip-columnists were announced; Wilner had made a collective appointment, like a Minister holding a press-conference. The little office was filled with journalists and photographers. Madame Létang retired discreetly into a corner. For the next few minutes the room was lit with thunderless lightning. The old

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Jupiter bridled, raised an eyebrow, deigned to give a smile or pretended to be irritated by the harmless lightnings of the magnesium. They took "Edouard Wilner standing," "Edouard Wilner sitting," "Edouard Wilner writing," "Edouard Wilner pulling his curtain aside and meditating on Paris . . ."

"Just one more, Monsieur Wilner, it's for *Vogue* . . . May I have one in profile, *Maitre*, for *Comœdia*? . . ."

Pretending to need the cigarette-lighter on the desk, Sylvaine went up to Wilner that she might be included in the photograph. There was as much sentiment as vanity in this desire. But the dramatist pushed her away with his large limp hand, muttering: "Stand back, mummer! You'll be photographed on the stage with the cast."

This time Sylvaine really was put out.

Then Wilner answered the reporters' questions and explained the subject of the play. The vitriol was money, money thrown like fatal acid into the face of human beings, destroying everything, emotion, love, family, and ending by corroding and killing even those who handled it. The play concerned a family of bankers.

"As for actors, I am delighted to have in the lead a young actress who has already played in my theatre and who will, I think, make her name in this part . . ."

One would never have thought that Sylvaine was standing a few paces from him.

Led to the other end of the office by a young journalist in search of an original story, Sylvaine simperingly replied: "Yes . . . well, yes . . . I've been on the stage for eight years . . . Yes, I began very young. I've played at the Variétés, at the Arts . . ."

As she enumerated her parts, she gained assurance the further away she got from her beginnings, gave dates and embellished the facts.

"But it's only since I've been working with Edouard Wilner, for whom I have immense admiration, immense gratitude," she went on, looking at the tyrant out of the corner of her eye, "that I feel I've understood what acting is really about. I owe him a lot; indeed, I'm immensely grateful to him for giving me the magnificent part of Emma in *Vitriol*, and I hope to be worthy of it . . ."

Her banalities were sincere, she was even moved. The resentment of a moment before had vanished; she was talking to the press, and everything seemed to be illuminated by a sort of sublime glow.

Wilner, who was secretly observing her and had heard scraps of what she was saying, thought: "Poor bitch!"

Whenever Wilner looked at Sylvaine in this hard, reproving way, her happiness was eclipsed and she wondered: "What have I done wrong this time?"

Indeed, Wilner was bored by Sylvaine beyond the limits of human endurance. Everything about her which, in the beginning, had seemed

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to him charming and refreshing, had now become intolerable. Sylvaine took up too much room in his life.

He calculated the time remaining to him for a moderate use of his virility, and the number of new women whom he might still discover, explore and love. Sylvaine's infuriating presence prevented his searching for these unknown women, these last jewels, these ultimate baubles, for the amusement of his old age.

Sylvaine had ceased to fulfil her function; that she should lie beside him, slender and naked, was no longer enough to calm Wilner's anguish at the sight of his own stomach spreading like the dome of a mosque, his own tired, old skin, already on the brink of putrefaction, and the deep navel through which had flowed the maternal sustenance.

He no longer desired Sylvaine, and in spite of his great age he had preserved the wise principle of leaving a woman as soon as he ceased to want her.

But he had allowed the young actress to cling to him like a leech; besides, he needed her for his play. Sylvaine had cost Wilner much time and some money. And he was not the man to lose an investment so easily.

"Ah, my dear Létang," he said to the manageress, "you see I am always the victim of other people's emotions."

The journalists left the office.

"Well, my big Edouard, about my seats, you'll give me ten," said Sylvaine.

"I said no," thundered Wilner. "Your little friends can buy their seats! And what's more, you can get out of here at once. You've got no claims. You're nothing. You only exist because of me; and if I so wish it you won't exist any more! Remember: 'I have made you with my hands and I shall unmake you!' Who said that? Did I say it, or was it Aeschylus?"

And he took her by the shoulders and pushed her gently towards the door. Then he came back to his chair, lowered himself into it sighing, and reflected for a few seconds.

"After," he said, looking at the manageress without seeing her, "it's the same destiny that impels two lovers towards each other and then one day repels them."

He remained thoughtful for a moment, and then pulled his notebook towards him.

"There's a complete subject for a play in what I've just said," he added.

Then, turning to the immediate problems, he went on: "Very well then, Létang, how many people will there be for supper after the performance? Sixty, seventy people . . . Three glasses of champagne each. No more. There are always people who don't drink. You can easily work it out on the basis of eight glasses to the bottle."

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VI

The play had been running for several minutes. The audience's attention was only disturbed by the whispered excuses of a few latecomers finding their seats.

Suddenly the curtain fell, and the lights came on in the auditorium again. A dim, rather funereal light, which fell on the regular alternations of bare shoulders and bald heads, treble pearl necklaces and stiff collars.

"Gracious, what's happening?" people asked.

They had seen no actor faint on the stage. Had fire broken out behind the scenes? The more imaginative began to stir and look at the exits. The more chivalrous, remembering the fires at the Opéra and the Charity Bazaar, began shouting: "Women first!" The politicians present immediately thought of assassination.

The velvet curtains parted, and Edouard Wilner, in a double-breasted dinner-jacket, came forward on to the proscenium. A deep silence fell over the great auditorium of the Deux-Villes Theatre.

"Ladies and gentlemen," said Wilner in a voice whose controlled roar seemed to emerge from caverns of fury, "the actors, having played the beginning of this act in a tempo totally different from that indicated by me, will have the honour of beginning it again."

There was relief and astonishment in the auditorium, a few laughs, and admiration too. Darkness fell once more.

Backstage, Sylvaine, tearful, on the verge of hysterics and supported by her colleagues, was screaming: "You can't do that! You can't do that to an actress on the night of the dress rehearsal."

"The dress rehearsal is still work," shouted Wilner.

He tapped his wrist-watch with his finger.

"The curtain's been up ten minutes and you've already lost three minutes on the text, bunch of swine that you are! At that rate the play'd last four hours!"

"But I had stage-fright!" groaned Sylvaine.

"I don't care a damn!"

"No, no, no! I won't go back on to the stage."

She was stamping her foot and shaking her hair.

"Very well," said Wilner, "send for the understudy."

Then Sylvaine reconsidered the matter and looked at Wilner with intense hatred.

"I'm not doing it for you, I can promise you that," she said. "It's only because I've got a sense of professional duty."

The curtain went up again and Sylvaine reappeared on the scene. Wild with anger, she uttered her lines like projectiles.

"She's got Sarah's voice, that child," whispered Baron Glück, raising himself in his seat to whisper into his neighbour's ear.

The play gained in vigour and truth; the audience forgot that they were sitting in their seats; in Sylvaine was suddenly realized that phenomenon called "presence," without which an actor is but a cardboard puppet. By her voice, her movements, the curve of her back, and thanks to the mysterious power that emanated from his young mistress, Wilner took his audience out of themselves and led them into the world he desired.

In the meantime he himself, walking up and down, looking at his watch, opening one of the pass-doors, taking the feel of the audience, growing indignant over a couple of empty seats, became vaguely aware of Marthe Bonnefoy and Madame Stenn in the shadows of box No 6, and behind them the President and Simon Lachaume.

He started as someone coughed and felt murderous.

In his own way he too was suffering from stage-fright.

Sylvaine finished the act to the same rhythm she had begun it, and the audience, carried away, gave her a sincere and generous ovation.

The crowd spread out into the foyer.

The men, walking slowly, stooping a little in their black coats and stiff shirts, looked like a lot of penguins paired with hens from the most diverse species of birds.

And yet these penguins and these multi-coloured birds represented all that was most cultured and intellectually subtle in the world; there were eight hundred people there who were arbiters of taste, success and fashion for the rest of the white race, whose dresses, jewels, aesthetic theories and judgments were awaited and emulated in London, Rome, New York, Stockholm, Belgrade and Buenos Aires. They were not all equally remarkable, but as a whole they were of significant quality.

This society liked its meat a little high. It must be admitted, however, that it offered some resistance to complete decomposition, since, in spite of what was said in every generation, it had preserved through revolutions, ruins and wars, its quality and its supremacy over two centuries.

There were also to be seen among them a large number of foreigners, or rather cosmopolitans, people who knew every capital but whom the Place de la Concorde attracted invincibly like a mirror, a decoy, bird-lime, and who, preserving the passports and nationality of the country of their birth, ended up by becoming Parisians both in thought and appearance.

The only unusual presence was that of Strinberg. He walked up and down in the company of Baron Schoudler; in his shirt-front he wore two pearls as big as blackbirds' eggs, and swayed gently in his long sloping boots. It was impossible to tell if he were amused, or merely interested. He was smoking huge cigarettes with gold tips, which he let fall behind him after taking four puffs. And the policeman on duty, instead of asking him politely to go and smoke in the vestibule,

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went and picked up from the carpet this gilded wake of a multi-millionaire.

"Have you seen Schoudler's hand; it's extraordinary!" people said.

The two financiers were talking in low voices. They were constantly followed, surrounded, preceded, by people who, though their expressions were detached, hoped for a nod, a smile, or a shake of the hand. It was remarked that Lachaume, one of the few who had the honour of being presented to the great Strinberg, maintained a manner of extreme coldness and moved away after a moment. On the other hand Anatole Rousseau was performing the gracious antics of a tumbler pigeon.

A little further off, Marthe Bonnefoy was displaying her silver hair, her magnificent shoulders, her clear laugh and her regal manner.

"Is that Strinberg?" she murmured to Simon and Robert Stenn. "He's done for, my friends. I can feel it, from the mere look of him, his eyes, his skin . . ."

People were talking of the play, and particularly of the incident of the curtain.

"He was quite right, quite right!" said colleagues who would never have the courage to do it themselves.

The critics were preparing their articles by trying out phrases on their friends, like butchers sharpening their knives before cutting up the carcass.

None of them would have the courage to admit frankly that the play delighted them; they were there to judge, and above all to scintillate if possible at the expense of another's work. They left delight to society and the bourgeois.

A homosexual, with turned-up cuffs to his dinner-jacket, was cheeping: "It's filth, my dear, or rather mousse of filth, you know, like that inferior foie gras that's called mousse of foie gras."

And then the bell rang, which stopped his cackle, and the penguins and birds returned to their seats.

When the set for the second act was revealed, there was some murmuring, and many eyes turned instinctively to the box in which sat the two financiers. For the scene represented, with libellous precision, the interior of the Schoudler home.

Paris could appreciate irony and the set was applauded. But as the act unfolded, similarity became even more evident, for there was a father, jealous of his power, preparing the ruin and death of his son.

It seemed almost as if Wilner had placed Schoudler in the stage-box to emphasize who his model was.

Still wandering about behind the doors, Wilner saw, in the sixth row of the stalls, an extremely pretty young woman sitting alone; ~~she was~~ the wife of an official at the Quai d'Orsay. He summoned the manageress.

"My dear Létang, you can do something for me," he said. "In the next interval you will go and find that ravishing lady, that marvellous person whom you see over there—she's called Madame Boitel and she looks so sad, poor child, that I can't bear it—and you will put her in my stage-box. Tell her that I absolutely insist. And then you will have flowers sent her."

"But where can I get them at this time of night, Monsieur Wilner?"

"How should I know? Fix something. Look, take some from Sylvaine's dressing-room. She's been sent so many today!"

For the third act Wilner, now certain of the success of his play, went, as was his custom, to his stage-box on the left so that people might say that he had been in the auditorium during the dress rehearsal, looking as calm as if he had been watching someone else's play.

He found the tall, young, fragile-looking Madame Boitel much embarrassed and withdrawn into the darkest corner, a bunch of gladioli at her feet.

"Well, and where's your husband?" he asked in a low voice.

"He's terribly disappointed. He had to go, sent for by his Minister."

"Ah, yes, excellent. It seems to me that the Republic is admirably governed."

He picked up the flowers and put them on her knees. Then gently massaging the young woman's waist, he whispered in her ear: "You're wonderfully beautiful . . . You're the most beautiful woman here to-night . . . Without you my glory would be valueless. I now realize that I wrote this play for you. I offer it to you."

He was determined to load her with gifts that cost him nothing.

Pretty Madame Boitel, still quite inexperienced, felt very unhappy, indeed tragically distressed. She had a sudden inspiration: "Please," she said, "let me listen; it's so beautiful!"

While this was going on, Sylvaine was struggling amid the ultimate agonies of the vitriol. In the last scene she played with a splendid, savage force that gave the audience no opportunity of searching their pockets for their cloakroom-tickets or their car-keys; it was a real success.

A few seconds before the final curtain Wilner went backstage.

The curtain fell; the auditorium burst into applause; the actors carefully counted the number of curtains.

Sylvaine came to the front of the stage and said in a voice trembling with emotion: "The play we have had the honour of presenting to you is by Monsieur Edouard Wilner." As if this announcement were a surprise, an extraordinary revelation to everyone, the applause grew even louder. The people who would say or write the most unpleasant things about the play were those who shouted loudest: "Author! Author!" Then Wilner appeared, magnificent and dominating in the apotheosis of his achieved creation, to receive the salvos of applause that reached

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him as must the sound of rain reach Zeus from the slopes of Olympus. He needed to receive their applause once a year that he might live and continue fruitful.

He took Sylvaine by the hand, led her forward and showed the new idol to the people, the latest mortal he had made into a goddess by honouring her with his desires.

Paris had a new great actress and he another personal triumph.

Then the crowd rushed towards the sacristy, that is to say backstage. On a narrow corkscrew staircase, on black iron steps, between dirty walls giving off a strange odour of grease-paint, dust, soup and urine, the men in their evening dress, the women in their velvets and satins, holding up their long dresses with be-ringed hands, were crowded together.

Little Baron Glück—"a drop of water with an eyeglass attached to it," said Wilner—capered, dodged and slithered among the mass of knees and elbows, till, like a champion, he reached the front of the crowd. He was passionately, madly devoted to the theatre; he knew all the actors, all the actresses. In some miraculous way he seemed to be found in every dressing-room at once, murmuring exaggerated praises.

"You were divine, darling, divine!" he said to Sylvaine. "You were Sarah, you were Réjane, you were Bartet; no, better still, you were yourself!"

"Is that really true? You're not just saying it to please me?" replied Sylvaine, overwhelmed with compliments.

Baron Glück was surprised not to see in Sylvaine's dressing-room the bunch of gladioli he had sent her; but he was very short-sighted and his eyeglass was not really much use and then the crowd bore him away to the dressing-room of Romain Dalmás who was playing the part of the son.

"Splendid, my boy, you were splendid . . ."

Edouard Wilner, hemmed in against a piece of scenery, had need of all his massive weight to resist the flood of admiration.

"Really . . . really? . . . You liked it? Then I'm delighted," he said.

From the way the critics shook his hand and from the expressions of his colleagues he judged what tomorrow's articles would be like.

A very old gentleman with a blotched skin the colour of gingerbread, and wearing a hearing-aid with a band across his skull, asked: "What is the name of the girl who plays the leading part?"

"Sylvaine Dual, my dear Duke."

"What? What was that?"

And he held his little microphone in front of Wilner's mouth that he might repeat the name.

The homosexual with the turned-up cuffs went by making a sign with his hand that his throat was cut by emotion.

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"Can't . . . it's too much . . ." he managed to mutter.

The women rushed forward.

"Edouard, I must kiss you!"

Wilner's cheeks were a specimen-card of all the lipsticks in Paris.

"You'll stay, won't you?" he whispered from time to time. "We're going to have a drink. But don't tell the others, so that we can just be among ourselves."

From time to time he looked over people's heads as if he were searching for someone. Alas! The ravishing, ingenuous, delicious young wife of the Quai d'Orsay official had disappeared.

When the flood had at last gone by and there remained only the froth of the faithful, Wilner said: "Well, my children, I'm hungry!"

He could not hear the people who, meeting on the pavement outside, were saying to each other: "Well, it wasn't a bad evening."

And some among them, who did not wish to go to bed, went to the last house of a cinema on the Boulevards where they were showing an extraordinary and miraculous film: one of the very first sound-films, the second to be precise, which was called *L'Epave Vivante*, in which men shut up in a submarine could be heard knocking against the hull in answer to the divers.

VII

In two offices especially arranged for the occasion, the elect, mingling with the actors, were devouring foie gras sandwiches, cold chicken and platefuls of cakes; and Madame Létang realized once again that three glasses of champagne per head were insufficient.

Wilner liked these parties after dress rehearsals, where success went on humming about him, where the words of his play were quoted, where he was congratulated on some particular scene, some particular line, some effect of surprise, and which put off the moment when he would find himself face to face once more with himself. But that night he received as many compliments on Sylvaine as on *Vitriol* and, though she too was his creation, it began to irritate him a little.

"My dear Edouard . . ." (their common relations with Marthe Bonnefoy permitted the young deputy this familiarity), "my dear Edouard," said Simon Lachaume, "how lucky you are! She's ravishing, she's brilliant, she'll have a wonderful career."

"You like her, my boy, do you?" Wilner replied. "Well, don't be embarrassed, try your luck or, rather, I mean to say, give her a chance. I think she's very interested in you. Yes, yes, I assure you."

Lachaume was momentarily surprised.

"You must be joking!" he said. "Everyone knows . . ."

"What? Me? Oh no, my dear fellow!" Wilner replied. "Oh no; I'm an old man! It's purely an artistic matter! I won't say that just by the way, like that . . ."

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They talked more generally about their amorous habits. Wilner declared that he could no longer bear a woman waking up in his house.

"And what about you?" he asked.

"Oh, always in theirs, never at home," replied Simon. "It avoids getting one's lines crossed, and it saves a great deal of time. I like leaving at four o'clock in the morning."

"Yes, yes," said Wilner, nodding his great head. "But you're young. You'll see as you get older. It gets very tiring having to put on one's trousers in the middle of the night."

They were interrupted by someone coming and saying to Wilner: "And how did Schoudler react? He must be furious. You went rather far!"

"It's a *pièce à clef*, flagrantly so," said someone else. "It's already the talk of Paris!"

It was the hundredth time since the end of the second act that Wilner had heard these words: "*pièce à clef* . . . *pièce à clef* . . . It is Schoudler, isn't it? . . . You must admit, it's Schoudler!"

He grew impatient, as if he felt that his work was being denigrated, reduced to some simple society game, and suddenly, holding a half-eaten drumstick in his hand and dominating the hubbub made by his guests, he let go in an organ-blast of rage.

"What does it mean, a *pièce à clef*?" he cried. "Every play is a *pièce à clef*. Racine's are *pièces à clef*. Do you mean to tell me that his *Alexandre*, which in any case is pretty bad except for two scenes, is not Louis XIV? And what about the novels? All novels are *à clef*. Balzac. Tolstoy. Tolstoy didn't even take the trouble to conceal his characters' names. He merely changed a letter and that sufficed. If I had taken my concierge for a model, or if I had merely taken some miscellaneous facts like Stendhal and twenty others, you wouldn't say that it was a *pièce à clef*, simply because you wouldn't know the model. And when I say models! Yes, exactly as a sculptor makes use of a woman whose breasts are on different levels and has spots on her bottom to make Venus out of her. For none of you, Mesdames," he went on, waving his drumstick, "have both breasts on the same level, I guarantee it! And if you like to take off your brassières, you'll see that I'm right."

Everyone had fallen silent; they were listening to him with amused surprise, wondering where his improvisation would lead.

"But we," he went on, "unlike the sculptors need ten models to make one prototype. What amuses you? What excites you? What is necessary to you? To be presented with the truth. We work with the material at our disposal and it is our absolute right to treat it as we wish. After all there are only two ways of writing, you know: staring at one's own navel or staring at other people's. And to produce a good work one must know how to look at both at once . . . A *pièce à clef* is an historical piece made out of one's contemporaries. You can be certain

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that you will only last as long as we wish, because it is in our plays, in our books, and nowhere else, not even on your tombstones, that future generations will look for the names you bear, the circumstances in which you lived, and even how you copulated. You can bless us for prolonging your lives beyond the miserable existence of your organs and your flesh. And if you've got warts, blame your forefathers, not us!"

Delighted with his latest eccentricity, he took a deep breath to recover himself. He had invited all these people to see his play free, and now here they were eating his cakes, and he suddenly felt that he wanted to throw them all out with kicks in the backside.

They hastily calmed him down and told him he was right.

"And do you want to know what Schoudler said to me," he added after a few moments: "'My dear fellow, you've been depicting the Leroy-Maublancs. It's really a remarkable likeness!...' So you see!...'"

Sylvaine was drunk. It was not that she had drunk inordinately, but champagne coming on top of her nervous tension, the emotion, the fatigue and the success, had made her to some extent lose control. She was still talking in her stage voice, too loudly and too emphatically; she could not keep off the subject of the incident of the lowering of the curtain, and was beginning to talk nonsense, stamping her foot and shaking her mane.

"Well, you can see how right I was!" said Wilner, irritated at seeing her in this condition.

The elect were leaving, after one more supreme compliment.

"Edouard, an unforgettable evening..."

Wilner, following the last of them down, said to Lachaume: "Tell me, my dear fellow, on your way home don't you go by the Rue de Naples where this pretty child lives?"

"Yes, yes, of course," replied Lachaume, who lived in exactly the opposite direction near the Trocadéro.

Besides, everything was turning out most conveniently, Marthe Bonnefoy had already left some time before with the Stenns, who were seeing her home.

"Oh, what do you mean, Edouard?" murmured Sylvaine.

Drunk, grateful, and perhaps for the first time really in love with Wilner, she clung to him on the corkscrew staircase, and covered her elderly lover's fine white scarf with make-up. She had wanted the evening to come to an end as it should, so that her joy should be perfect, complete and dispersed equally over every part of her body.

"No, no, my dear. The chauffeur is exhausted. I insist that he goes to bed. Our friend will take you home."

Such solicitude for his staff would, on any other day, have seemed very peculiar to Sylvaine.

On the pavement she made one more effort to prolong the evening.

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"Supposing we went and had a drink somewhere," she suggested.

Wilner shook his head.

"As far as I'm concerned, my children," he said, "I'm overwhelmed with sleep, fatigue and triumph. I'm going to bed."

Then, in a low voice, to Simon, as he sincerely shook his hand, he let fall from his gargoyle-like mouth: "Thank you, my dear fellow, you're doing me a good turn."

VIII

Pleasure had sobered Sylvaine and had spread a delightful languor through her taut nerves. Simon was certainly no picture of beauty; but, after several months of fidelity to Wilner, he represented novelty and youth to Sylvaine.

Simon and Sylvaine talked of the night they had spent together seven years before in this very flat, after Émile Lartois's election to the Académie Française.

But that night it had been Simon who was drunk.

"What exactly did we do?" asked Simon.

"What do you mean? Don't you remember?"

Yes. Simon Lachaume remembered. Or rather he preserved those scraps of memory which drunkenness carves more deeply on the memory than any other condition, yet leaves blank places, irremediably empty gaps. He remembered the room, but with a wall of gold stars of varying sizes that was no longer there.

"Has the wallpaper been changed?" he asked.

"No. Though it needs it. I must have it done," she replied, her hand beneath her head, raising her fine copper hair.

He remembered also two figures enlaced on this very bed, Sylvaine and Maublanc; he remembered himself, lying on a sofa, eating a hard-boiled egg.

"And then I remember your breasts under me. Am I wrong?"

"Is that all?" she murmured ironically.

Simon turned down the sheets, looked at Sylvaine's pretty breasts and tried to see if they were at the same level.

"That was the night I made that poor Lulu believe he had given me children."

Now that he had been cold for many years, and she had hastened his ruin, his madness and his death, Sylvaine called Maublanc "that poor Lulu!"

"No, he was really a swine," she said. "Oh, don't let's talk any more about all that, do you mind? It was all a horrible, beastly, hideous period of my life. I should like never to think of it again. I'd so much rather this was the first time we had met. Just like this..." she said politely.

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"But it is the first time," he replied with an equal politeness that committed him to nothing.

She thought that it was clearly her fate to find herself with men to whom she had given herself in the past, and who did not remember it, or hardly did so. "Is it that I've changed, and that in those days I was insignificant . . ." And he also was thinking that fate repeated itself, that they should meet on nights of celebration, so that he should take her over from old men. A repetition of fate which was in fact no more than the disposition common to all human beings to behave in the same way in similar circumstances.

While thinking thus, sitting on the edge of the bed, he was gently caressing the points of her breasts, and Sylvaine was quivering.

At that moment a key turned in the lock of the front door. Sylvaine sat up with a cry of terror.

"It's Edouard," she said, her face terror-stricken, covering her breasts with the sheet.

Lachaume got up and instinctively went over to a chair. Fortunately he had already put on his trousers, his shoes and his stiff collar; the humiliation of nakedness or shirt-tails was spared him.

Wilner was already in the room. The feeble light of the bedside lamp made him seem still larger and more menacing. His jaw was trembling. His huge nostrils were puffing out the air with a noise like a forge.

Simon, without being able to explain to himself the strange and diabolical reactions of this man, at once foresaw the whole drama, imagined in the same moment shouts, a ridiculous hand-to-hand fight with this old colossus—or worse, a shot—saw the scandal, and Marthe hearing of it, and feared at once for his career, his reputation and even his life.

"I knew it! I suspected it! I was certain of it!" cried Wilner, his arms folded, his hands clasping his biceps. "So one cannot even trust you with a friend without this happening!"

"But we haven't done anything!" stuttered Sylvaine, near to tears. "I merely went to bed and we talked . . ."

"Don't lie to me as well!" he cried.

He raised his hand as if he were going to slap her face. Sylvaine protected her face with her elbow and Simon wondered whether he should intervene. Wilner pulled down the sheets and left Sylvaine naked. She screamed.

"And it's just to talk that you're lying there naked, is it?" he cried. Then, turning to Simon with a grandiose gesture of generosity, he said: "As for you, my boy, I don't hold it against you; you have merely behaved as men do, as they disgustingly do, it was only to be expected."

It was only then that Simon realized it was all a put-up job, and felt greatly relieved, though somewhat humiliated.

"As for her," went on Wilner, pointing to Sylvaine, "that little

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whore, that little bitch, after what I've done for her, to choose a day such as this, on which she ought to be blessing me, ought to be at my feet! . . . Oh, life will make you pay for this, surely and dearly, because there is some justice in the world . . ."

He was playing with effective conviction a scene drawn from his own repertoire. He sank into a chair.

"To do this to an old man!" he said, in a silence that was broken only by Sylvaine's sobs.

And suddenly, in the presence of this naked, sobbing woman, and this man who had just slept with her, he was assailed by an emotion he had not foreseen, a condition of erotic and painful disquiet, a sort of sad excitement, a pernicious suffering that lodged both in his mind and in his body.

His rage was feigned, but his sorrow was real. His plan had turned against himself.

For a moment he regretted not having arrived earlier, before Simon had dressed, so as to force them to go through the motions of love in his presence; in their situation he had the right to demand anything. He might at least have derived some pleasure from it rather than this sensation of a surgical operation, the lancet cutting into his tissues.

"My position is ridiculous," said Simon after a moment.

"It's human, my boy," replied Wilner.

He got to his feet.

"Edouard! Edouard! I didn't want to wound you," Sylvaine groaned.

"You know that I never forgive," replied Wilner with a hardness which, this time, was not simulated. "I'm too old. I no longer have time."

He had found a justification in his own mind for getting rid of her. Then he said to Simon: "I think you'll be good enough to drive me home, drive home an old man who has lost his last illusions. I think you owe me that at least."

They left without saying, either of them, a word of goodbye to Sylvaine.

They were driving from the Plaine Monceau towards the Seine, when Wilner said to Simon: "I did not want to keep the taxi waiting. They are a ruinous price at night . . . Doesn't it tire you driving yourself?"

"No," replied Simon automatically, his eyes fixed beyond the wind-screen. They fell silent.

Wilner could smell on Simon the scent Sylvaine always used, and that other scent, at once attractive and embarrassing, that her body exuded at certain moments.

"How many times did you make love to her tonight?" Wilner asked.

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To avenge himself for the walking-on part that Wilner had made him play, Simon replied: "Three," which was a lie by one-third.

"Ah!" said Wilner.

As the moments passed, Simon felt his resentment against the old man growing. A dozen times he was on the point of saying: "If you needed my help, you might at least have warned me more explicitly . . ."

"Above all don't be anxious on the subject of our dear Marthe," said Wilner. "You can be assured that I shall not say a word about it to her."

He pushed his sharp practice so far that, having used Simon for his own ends, he was now taking advantage of him by this means also.

"She ground her teeth with pleasure, didn't she?" he went on. "Yes, while Marthe utters a loud, hoarse cry . . ."

Silence fell between them again, broken only by the whispering of the tyres. Dawn revealed the ridges of the roofs and both men had that feeling of a prolongation, a strangeness of life, which greets one towards the end of a sleepless night.

"It's curious," went on Wilner, "this need we have of keeping possession of people when we no longer desire them. We poison our lives with it . . ."

He touched his chin, the little malleable agglomeration of fat responded softly to his fingers, and he thought that it was perhaps there that his face would begin to rot.

IX

Next day, the day of the first night proper of *Vitriol*, Sylvaine went to see Wilner in his office. Wilner shut his door to everyone, even to Madame Létang.

The scene which then took place was long and stormy, filled with Sylvaine's tears and supplications.

"But I was drunk," Sylvaine explained. "But you must understand, it was because I was so happy! It was with you I wanted to be. Not for one moment did I stop thinking of you, of being with you. I'm ashamed, I'm so ashamed of what I did!"

But Wilner was intractable and inflexible. He was even witty.

"I lived nearly seventy-two years without knowing you," he said. "I shall certainly be able to manage without you for the remainder of my life."

He was thinking out the dialogue for his new play. Sylvaine had realized for a long time that she was as much an object of irony and contempt to him as of desire; she served him as a target at which he could aim his shafts experimentally. But she had never felt it so deeply as today, because the desire had disappeared and only the irony remained.

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"Besides," he said, "don't imagine that yesterday's little game confers on you any superiority over me. The first of us to deceive the other was myself. The day after you first came to my house I had a little actress in my office, and a few days later I had Inès Sandoval, and I shall not mention the others from discretion. Considerable experience has taught me that as soon as one has had a woman, one must, within the next forty-eight hours, make love to another. It's a simple form of insurance for the future."

She saw Edouard Wilner just as he was, monstrous; and yet she could not help suffering and asking him to keep her because there was something in him which surpassed ordinary humanity, something whose sudden withdrawal seemed to leave a void.

"But how on earth am I going to act tonight, look at my face!" she said, raising the mirror of her compact, as if to prove to herself that she was disfigured and that forgiveness alone could restore her normal appearance. "You are wrong, Edouard; you're being stubborn out of pride, but I can assure you that you're wrong. You'll regret me."

"That's what all women say; but the extraordinary thing is that it's always they who regret us and not we who regret them."

"You'll never find another like me."

"Thank God!"

"All the same, I've made you a present of my youth . . ."

"But you've made it to so many people . . ."

He drew some papers towards him.

"Listen," he said. "You'll see that I am being as generous as possible, indeed much more so than I would have believed myself capable of being. I might avenge myself, turn you out of my theatre, and you'd deserve it. But I do not want private life to trespass on art. I have not brought you as far as this to destroy your career now. You will therefore sign this contract, so that everything may be clear between us from now on, purely the relationship between a manager and an actress."

She was ready to sign anything he wanted; her eyes bright with tears, she signed, without reading it, an exclusive contract for five years with the Deux-Villes Theatre at a very low salary with, moreover, a twenty-per-cent commission to Wilner on all film or other contracts she might obtain, with the obligation of not making the said contracts without his prior agreement and, finally, with a forfeit of a million francs should she break, either in fact or law, any of the clauses in the present agreement.

"Believe me, you're very lucky," he said as he took the pen from her hand.

Then, when she had gone, he opened the door of Madame Létang's office.

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"It's done," he said. "Have you remembered to send flowers to that pretty Madame Boitel? You have. Excellent. Then show me the proofs of the posters, and let me see the booking returns."

X

With the shortest possible delay, and by an act of personal authority, Anatole Rousseau had authorized the Schoudler bank to deal in the operations of the War Damage Associations. But he had been careful not to conclude the Strinberg loan too quickly. He had the best card of his career up his sleeve. It would be no use to him, as Minister of Finance, to achieve a success which would merely profit the Prime Minister. He contented himself with letting it be widely known in political circles, and even having it confirmed on occasion by Strinberg himself, that he had received guarantees from the financier. And then he waited. And he did not have to wait long. The Government was defeated in the Senate on some unimportant question, merely because Parliament was looking for an occasion to do so; and Rousseau was not wholly innocent of having worked behind the scenes to bring about the Government's fall.

Governments, at this period, were succeeding each other at an average rate of one a fortnight. Some did not even manage to remain in office for twenty-four hours and fell immediately they appeared before the Chambers. Crises lasted nearly as long as the lifetimes of Governments. The newspapers announced new combinations every day and contradicted them the next. The President of the Republic's consultations began at dawn and continued till four o'clock the next morning. And it took longer to organize precarious majorities, by subtle bargaining and alliances, than to destroy them.

The Government, therefore, fell; Government bonds also fell several points; and the negotiations began. For more than a week the party leaders and the principal political personalities sought, on the telephone, at meals, in cars, on foot, and even in the brief silence of their beds, the solution to an insoluble problem. Three combinations had failed as soon as attempted. The President of the Republic, therefore, sent for a fat, cunning, if absent-minded man, called Camille Porterat, who had on two occasions succeeded in forming a cabinet in identical circumstances.

Porterat mistrusted no one on principle. "It would be a waste of time," he said. He did not even mistrust his own secretary who, as a creature of Anatole Rousseau's, telephoned Rousseau immediately at the Rue de Rivoli or at his private house whenever Porterat summoned a politician to whom he intended offering a portfolio.

"He's sent for Barthou . . . He's sent for Clémentel . . . He's going to offer the Ministry of Justice to Pierre Laval . . ."

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Then Rousseau would pick up his telephone and talk to the politicians concerned.

"I must see you at once, my dear fellow," Rousseau would say. "You know, Porterat hasn't a chance. Don't let yourself be seduced by the old siren's song, because you'll be in danger of finding yourself alone with him . . . It would be a catastrophe for our credit abroad. That's right, come and see me first."

"Yes, at bottom, all his selections are highly intelligent, extremely judicious," Anatole Rousseau thought, unable not to admire Porterat's cleverness and cunning.

The game went on all day but, by evening, Camille Porterat was nevertheless surprised to find that he had received a refusal from every single person on a list that had seemed to be faultless; and he informed the President of the Republic that he was coming round to hand him his resignation. As he arrived, tired and stooping, at the Elysée Palace, he saw Anatole Rousseau coming out, surrounded by journalists, under the fire of photographers, exactly like a great actress on the gang-plank of a liner or Edouard Wilner on the day of a dress rehearsal.

"Monsieur le Président de la République," declared Rousseau in a precise, well-modulated voice, "has just charged me with the difficult task of forming a government. I have thought it my duty to accept. The situation is serious, if not tragic." (A new Prime Minister had never been known to say that the situation he was taking in hand was anything but tragic.) "It is urgently necessary on the one hand to protect the small investor and, on the other, to re-establish the prestige of France, which has been gravely compromised in foreign relations by governmental instability. We must act quickly; and we must act forthrightly. I hope, shortly, to form a government on a wide national basis and, above all, a government that will be stable."

He was a new man. His face expressed such energy, such assurance and such dignity as to amount to a revelation. He himself felt that he had grown taller by several inches and, since he had been passionately awaiting this day for forty years, he felt younger by that period of time.

Those about him had also changed; they were now attentive, solicitous, deferential; they bowed and scraped.

Camille Porterat passed by, shrugging his shoulders.

The evening papers came out with a special edition. Rousseau was hailed as the one man capable of restoring confidence. The political commentators emphasized the esteem the former Minister of Finance enjoyed in international financial circles.

Rousseau had promised to act quickly; he kept his word; all the more easily since his list of ministers, stolen in its entirety from Porterat, was ready to hand.

Out of courtesy Rousseau telephoned Simon Lachaume.

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"I should very much have liked, my dear Simon," he said, "to have kept a place for you. Unfortunately the refusal of your friend Stenn, which prevents my national coalition being based as broadly as I could wish, also prevents me, you understand, don't you . . . ?"

Then, as if there were not a minute to lose, even though the country had managed without a government for ten days, he took his new colleagues at midnight to present them to the President of the Republic.

The following morning the newspapers carried banner headlines:

THE ROUSSEAU GOVERNMENT COMPLETE

A huge photograph of the Cabinet, taken by flashlight on the steps of the Elysée, informed France that the same faces, ravaged by ambition and insomnia, had grown on the hydra once again, the same bald skulls, the same vacant smiles, the same jowls, the same spectacles and the same beards.

Rousseau, in a quarter of an hour, had to digest reading matter which would normally have kept him happy for a fortnight: "The new Prime Minister's career . . . Anatole Rousseau, the man to restore confidence . . ."

"This is something like a Government!" cried Rousseau, slapping the pile of newspapers with the back of his hand.

"Put all these on one side, Dupetit; I'll read them when I've got a little more time."

Then, in the afternoon, the hydra went and placed its multiple bottom on the Government bench in the Palais Bourbon. On the Bourse the bonds had gone up, which was a good augury. It was expected that the Government could count on a majority of nineteen votes. Rousseau obtained thirty-one, and from then on believed himself firmly in the saddle.

He had, of course, kept the Ministry of Finance for himself. With no reasonable basis for his belief, Rousseau thought that the hour of great, durable governments, similar to those of the early days of the Republic, had struck once more on the boulevards. Where all his colleagues had failed during the last ten years, he believed that he would succeed. As he made his governmental speech, which was largely similar to those of his predecessors, he convinced himself of the strength, profundity and evident truth of his words, although, when they had been uttered by others, they had seemed to him to be "nothing but cat's meat."

He was going to conclude the Strinberg loan, and from then on perform a series of miracles: score repeated successes in Parliament and before public opinion, restore the situation in a few weeks, pass the budget before the end of the year, create general prosperity and visit in considerable pomp the war-damaged areas which would have been reconstructed in record time . . . The well-being of France now became his personal concern. He would continue to govern for two years, four

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years, perhaps even more . . . He imagined himself, with a certain complacency, dying in power, being accorded a national funeral and taking his place in history among the great statesmen.

In the meantime he was having his bust done by the same official sculptor who had once taken Marthe Bonnefoy as model for Marianne.

He managed to give the artist a ten-minute sitting every day; but, except for this brief moment of relaxation—during which, while the sculptor applied the points of his dividers to his face, his head rang with the verses he had learned as a child:

“The bust outlasts the throne.”

—except for this brief moment he had to deal with a crushing amount of work, most of which was routine, but he did not feel that his reserves of strength were being drawn upon too heavily.

XI

At the moment when Anatole Rousseau wished to conclude the loan, he learned that Strinberg had suddenly left for Zürich. He was staying at the Dolder, a luxurious hotel overlooking the town and the golf-course. Rousseau had a telephone call put through to the Dolder. Strinberg had already left and gone to the Metropole in Brussels. Rousseau informed Schoudler; Schoudler sent an emissary, who remained there forty-eight hours, the time it took him to discover that Strinberg was at the Ritz.

“But he can’t be at the Ritz, or I should know of it,” replied Schoudler when he was told.

“No, the Ritz in London. But he’s due to return to Brussels the day after tomorrow.”

Everyone was chasing Strinberg all over Europe. Schoudler, with his twitching hand and bowler hat, himself took the train to Belgium, saw Strinberg, and returned to Rousseau with the formal assurance that the loan would be concluded within a week.

Strinberg kept his word. Eight days later the Pleyel concert grand was again taken up to the suite on the second storey of the hotel on the Place Vendôme, anticipating the financier’s arrival by a few hours. During the course of the evening the latter had an extremely long interview with Rousseau. As he came away from the meeting the Prime Minister seemed as gratified as he had been on the day he assumed power. Strinberg had signed precise undertakings and had acquired, over Rousseau’s signature, reciprocal undertakings from the French Government.

Rousseau took Strinberg to supper in a restaurant in the Rue Royale, which was famous throughout the world, and where all Paris would see them. The Prime Minister was indeed so happy that he invited

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Dupetit, his principal private secretary, to accompany them. The financier, as was his custom, drank nothing but mineral water.

Next morning Strinberg was found dead in his bathroom, the artery of his wrist severed.

Strinberg was a tidy man; he had taken the precaution of lying down in a long chair and letting his arm drip over the *bidet*.

Nor was there anything to be found in the suite, not a paper, not a passport; merely a few crumbled ashes in the fireplace.

The police inquest and the autopsy nevertheless revealed a number of curious things. In the first place, the severing of the artery with a razor-blade had been preceded by the taking of a strong dose of a narcotic mixed with wine. Further, the deceased had many years before been amputated above the left ankle and wore an artificial foot. And this amputation, which explained Strinberg's limp and his custom of invariably wearing boots, opened the way to another discovery.

On examining their records, the Intelligence Service and the Foreign Department were able to establish a disquieting but evident identity—in so far as a description of physical appearance thirty-five years old would permit—between the dead multi-millionaire and a militant social-revolutionary of Lettish origin, the illegitimate son of a Baron von Strudberg, who had travelled in many countries, of which France was one, under his father's name, and was known as a terrorist owing to the fact that, in 1895, he had placed a bomb in front of the Government Buildings in Warsaw. The bomb had exploded prematurely and blown off the young revolutionary's foot.

The fact that Strinberg held women at arm's length might be in part explained by the fear he must have had of undressing in their presence.

After the bomb incident the social-revolutionary Strudberg had disappeared for ever. Hospital? Prison? Removal by some group of comrades? Nothing more was known.

Strinberg had reappeared in 1913 in Oslo, in the character he had maintained until his suicide in the Place Vendôme. He had at that time arrived from northern Norway, and already commanded a certain amount of capital; or at least had acquired a certain amount of power in agriculture and shipping. Among other ventures he had founded a co-operative fishery and had at once started building and equipping ships, which he then sold to the co-operative. It was also said that the basis of his credit was a forged document, the authorization for an overdraft drawn up by himself; he had learned of the death of a banker, had forged his signature and presented the document a few hours before the bank heard of the decease.

If one looked at the map of those northern regions, one could amuse oneself by imagining the adventurer's journey and how he had shed, disillusioned by the failure of his act of terrorism, his original personality in the solitudes of Lapland. What professions had he followed?

What physical hardships had he endured? What urge to live and triumph must have sustained him during those eighteen years!

Strinberg's official nationality was Norwegian.

But there was another strange fact; the Norwegian Consul-General, who had immediately been informed of the suicide, was never allowed to view the body.

When the diplomat arrived with all speed at the hotel in the Place Vendôme, the corpse had already been removed in the goods-lift and taken away by the police. Moreover, no member of the hotel staff had seen it. The secretary, who had made the macabre discovery, had stationed Strinberg's chauffeur and one of his bodyguards on the door until the police inspectors arrived. The Consul went to the Medico-Legal Institute; the autopsy was already being performed. When he returned, the body had already been cremated, in accordance, so it was said, with the formal desire of the deceased which, however, no document was ever produced to prove. The Consul merely received a little urn for dispatch to the fortress in the Baltic.

The police had received strict orders from the Prime Minister's office to maintain silence. The official version was that the financier had committed suicide during an attack of neurasthenia. The evening papers, which did their best to provide romantic nourishment for their readers, lost themselves in conjectures and had to make do with merely secondary information: "The neighbours in the room underneath heard a piano playing until four o'clock in the morning." Or again: "What was the meaning of the mysterious telephone-call from Brussels?"

It was, however, impossible to conceal, particularly from the Opposition press, that the Prime Minister had dined with Strinberg on the very night of the suicide.

Rousseau was in a state of anxious indignation. Though assured that Strinberg had burnt all his papers, he was terrified at the thought that someone had abstracted the documents he had signed the night before and would use them against him.

"The swine, the swine, he's tricked me," he kept thinking. "My first impression was right. I knew it. As soon as I saw that man . . ."

Yet Strinberg had not intended to "trick" Rousseau; he had acted in good faith throughout their negotiations, for the prime reason that the majority of the funds he had promised the French Government would return to the War Damage Associations. Thanks to the purchasing co-operatives which Strinberg had created parallel to the Associations, he would be able to arrange huge orders for material from his saw-mills in Finland, his steel-mills in Sweden and his glass-factories in Czechoslovakia, which would absorb stocks now dangerously accumulating in the warehouses, and start the wheels revolving again in factories that had closed down owing to over-production. Had he not even visualized

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a considerable importation of spawn from his Norwegian hatcheries for the restocking of the "devastated" rivers?

The simple-minded might wonder why Strinberg took so much trouble to organize this complicated chain of operations, to construct this immense closed circle, instead of retiring to live in the country by the rivers he loved and meditate on the fact that the waters which flow to the sea evaporate and turn into clouds only to fall again as rain.

But it appears that the fecundity of man's labour, like the earth's fertility, can exist only at the price of ceaselessly repeated movements whose ends return to lose themselves in their beginnings.

And then, one day, the lightning-flash changes the rain to hail and destroys the harvest, or a landslide dams the river and drowns the valley.

Strinberg had to find somewhere the funds he proposed lending France. He asked the Belgian Government, which, in its turn, asked for guarantees. Strinberg offered credits he held on the Italian Government. It was a secret operation, so secret that only the Belgian Minister of Finance and the Governor of the Bank of Belgium were allowed to see the documents. And then, incidentally, fortuitously, a comparatively unimportant official revealed that Strinberg had never had any Italian credits. Alarmed, but incredulous, the Government made discreet enquiries and discovered that the documents were forged.

It was the announcement of this discovery that was the subject-matter of the "mysterious telephone-call from Brussels."

Robert Stenn was able to discover this before even Rousseau himself, while all the Stock Exchanges of Europe and even of America fell dangerously.

"But all the same, that does not explain his death," said Stenn to Simon. "Because Strinberg knew very well that the banks of Stockholm, London and Zürich, even his worst enemies, would have preferred to put up temporary funds and cover his forgery rather than suffer the consequences of his collapse in such circumstances. And another thing, Strinberg must have found himself suddenly in the position of a scientist who has built up his whole work on the basis of a formula which he suddenly discovers to be erroneous. The bomb exploded at his feet for the second time . . . You see, Lachaume, how right I was not to let you embark in that galley! . . . But we shall now have to move with care."

Simon had already made his own arrangements.

XII

As soon as Simon, who happened to be in his office at the *Echo du Matin*, had learned of Strinberg's death, he had informed Schoudler, not by telephone but by a note of which he was careful to keep a copy,

and in which he asked whether there were likely to be repercussions on the newspaper. He sent the note to the bank by a man on a bicycle.

Schoudler sent him an answer on a bank-note for a thousand francs across which he had written in a wild, almost indecipherable hand: "No repercussions. The paper should adopt the official version. I shall replace Strinberg. That is all. Sch."

Schoudler had already frequently used bank-notes for giving his orders, their value being proportionate to the importance of the message or that of the recipient: five francs to tell his butler that he was bringing two people home to luncheon, or a hundred francs for recommending a journalist to the editor of the *Echo*.

Having received, and carefully folded away, this note which established undeniably Schoudler's mental derangement, Simon, in his capacity as manager, ordered that all payments should be suspended and that the accounts should immediately be balanced.

This would have been the normal proceeding to take had Schoudler announced financial insolvency. But, taken thus prematurely, it could only accelerate or even perhaps create catastrophe.

Simon's order coincided with the day on which payments were normally made. To hasten the disaster, Simon warned, in the most courteous manner, the various suppliers that they would not receive their cheques for several days. The paper merely paid certain contributors with the liquid cash that happened to be in the safe; then the accountant closed his office and the regular staff were not paid.

Schoudler learned of the measures Simon had taken only that evening. An appalling scene took place between them in which Simon was called "a coward, a traitor and an assassin."

"Very well, you can start making payments again tomorrow, since everything is going so well," he replied calmly. "I only took this decision so as to be able to close my administrative accounts today."

And at the same time he handed Schoudler his letter of resignation, in which he declared that he could not be associated with the management of a business whose fate was linked with a bank which seemed to him to be run on dangerous lines.

"Dangerous, dangerous," said Schoudler laughing, "when I've got the two thousand million for the Associations on deposit!"

Then Simon, his hands perfectly clean, awaited developments with Marthe and President Stenn.

The effect of panic Simon had wished to create was successful. It was known all over Paris that the *Echo* was not paying, that Schoudler was involved in the Strinberg catastrophe, and that the bank would probably fail.

Next day the more prudent customers began withdrawing their balances at the counters in the Rue des Petits-Champs. These withdrawals increased tragically during the following days.

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The Inspector of Finance, who was responsible for the control of the War Damage Associations, demanded, to relieve himself of responsibility, the immediate withdrawal of the authorization given to the Schoudler bank.

Schoudler went to plead with Rousseau to take no action.

"I am the victim of a most abominable conspiracy, and it's only a matter of forty-eight hours," Schoudler said. "But if you withdraw from me the State's confidence, you'll destroy me."

He reminded Rousseau of their long friendship and struck the chord of memory. Rousseau had been Schoudler's legal adviser; Schoudler had supported Rousseau in the difficult beginnings of his political career . . .

The giant upset the inkpot with his sick hand. Then he recovered himself.

"You placed the red ribbon of the Legion of Honour round my neck; are you now going to put a rope round it?" he cried. "You may be certain that it's not only me they're after, but you too; they want to destroy us together. But here we both are; and there's nothing they can do. I guarantee that in two days the Bourse will improve; they can't go on gambling against themselves. You do not destroy a Schoudler! . . . It's jealousy, do you hear? It's jealousy urging them on. Anatole, we're too big for them," he added, generously associating the Prime Minister with his own conception of himself. "As for that little toad Lachaume, whom I have treated like a son . . ."

Rousseau allowed himself to be convinced; it was not to his advantage to ruin Schoudler but rather to give him the chance of holding out.

But the next session of the Bourse was a rout. What were known as the Schoudler securities, that is to say, among others, the Sonchelles Sugar Refineries, the Zoa Mines and spot dealings in the shares of the bank itself, followed the same course that the Strinberg securities had taken on all the markets of the world. In disappearing, Strinberg's power, based on wind, dragged down with it the Schoudler fortune, which had been built up over a century, exactly as a hurricane, blowing into cracks in the walls, can destroy an ancient house.

Schoudler received the full blast of the tornado.

He tried to repeat what he had done seven years before, at the time of the Sonchelles affair and François's suicide. He reappeared at the Bourse, his eyes still dark chinks behind the narrow slits of his eyelids, but his body had weakened and his mind grown old and disordered. The situation was far from being the same. The Sonchelles affair had been merely an artificial lowering of values against which he had the means to stand out in a period of general prosperity. Now the catastrophe was a real one.

In his megalomania Baron Schoudler had succeeded in confusing his own fortune with the funds administered by the bank. On the strength

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of millions scattered widespread in absurd enterprises, film companies which had never shown a profit, fashion houses which had gone bankrupt, expeditions to survey the Congo-Zanzibar Railway, into all sorts of hopeless ventures which his morbid hunger for power had made him swallow, he had a fantastic overdraft on his own bank.

To check the fall and meet the withdrawals, Schoudler, on this fatal day, used the funds belonging to the War Damage Associations' loan.

But in vain. What he thought he had gained on one side, he lost, more seriously, on the other.

An old man, who had survived his family and practically all his friends, he was jostled, elbowed out of the way, treated as a nobody amid the general consequences of his own collapse, while in his head, like a bad song, the words of his grandfather, the first Baron Schoudler, ran insistently: "*Die Banken, der Zucker und die Presse, das ist die Zukunft.*"

"Assassins, assassins!" he cried at the end of the session. "I am being assassinated."

But in his heart he could not believe it.

That very evening the authorization was at last withdrawn by the Ministry of Finance, and next day the bank in the Rue des Petits-Champs had to close its doors.

It was collapse, failure, disaster.

The great economic and financial crisis began with the death and the ruin respectively of two men who had represented the false and the true prosperity of the world.

"The bones of poor Lulu must be frisking in their grave," said the Leroy-Maublancs.

For Rousseau also it was too late. The matter of the bond-holding syndicates had become known and a question had already been tabled in the office of the Chamber.

XIII

The usher who opened the gallery door with alacrity to Marthe Bonnefoy permitted himself to remark: "Well, Madame, there's going to be some fun tonight!"

"Perhaps," replied Marthe, with her lovely smile; "it will mean your getting to bed late."

"Oh, that can't be helped; that's what we're here for. Besides, we get paid overtime of course."

All the staff of the Chamber of Deputies were very fond of Marthe, who allied to her sovereign beauty much gracious politeness and friendliness. She took her place in the first row on the narrow, ill-upholstered bench.

There were already a number of women in the galleries, old women who had passed the age for other nocturnal amusements and came here

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with owl-like faces to use up what remained to them of passion; and also a few young and elegant women, who had only recently entered society, and to whom the deputies had given admission cards to flatter them and recompense them for being pretty, as Wilner might have sent them seats for his theatre.

They had been promised that tonight they would see in the arena a little old gladiator of seventy, with thick white hair and too-high heels, thrown to the men.

For the moment they saw no one but the attendants, who were collecting the boxes of votes on leaseholds, a vote which interested no one except eight million tenants spread across France.

The light, at once grey and strong, increased the proportions of the huge building.

There were barely sixty deputies in session, spread over the red tiers and flattened with boredom. They looked like the last senators of an ancient city annihilated by the passage of an invasion or devastated by an epidemic plague.

The pretty young women in the galleries gazed with surprised, unintelligent and disappointed eyes at this vast and spectacular dreariness, at the high marble columns which supported and separated the public galleries all round the vast hall, at the glass roof, at the two clocks, at the allegorical tapestry occupying the centre of the wall behind the President between two white statues sunk in their niches, and at the green hangings decorated in gold.

The gallery was small; and more people kept coming in till the young women began to feel suffocated.

But towards two o'clock in the morning the spectacle came to life. In slow groups, or sometimes in little bunches, thrust forward by the boot of an invisible giant, the deputies came in by the side-doors and went to their seats. Some, but very few, had gone home to have a bath, others, on the benches of the Right and Centre, having come from some party or lengthy dinner, were wearing dinner-jackets. But most of them had not changed their shirts since the previous morning: they had dirty, crumpled collars and none-too-clean hands.

To the sinister silence of a few moments ago had now succeeded a confused hubbub as, within the parties, the last plans for attack or defence were being laid. The sitting was suspended for a few minutes. The Vice-President, who had controlled the debate on leaseholds, abandoned the desk. The Chamber had then been sitting for nearly sixteen hours.

Marthe Bonnefoy saw Robert Stenn and Simon arrive together in the semi-circle, and her heart began to beat quicker. The two men raised their eyes, saw Marthe where they knew they would find her, beautiful beneath her silver hair, exactly in the centre of the colonnade, in the first row of the President's gallery, as if in the forefront of an

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Imperial box. They exchanged a long and discreet glance with her, to assure her that they would be wearing her colours in the arena. Then they sat down side by side with a feeling of their own importance.

"Robert looks tired tonight; it's a nuisance; I'd have liked him to have all his faculties to support Simon," thought Marthe with maternal solicitude. . . . "Rousseau, on the other hand, seems in very good form."

And indeed the little gladiator had just made his entry, his expression confident, his chin held high, his white lock of hair proudly thrown back. He went and sat down on the Government bench among his Ministers, in that place he had coveted so long, and which was already compromised. Nevertheless, after the first moments of panic which had followed the death of Strinberg and the Schoudler crash, Anatole Rousseau had regained confidence; and the bonds had become stable, which was a good sign. Moreover, having examined his own personal situation with care, he had realized that he could not be accused of anything serious, of any flagrant lack of principle or of any irregularity. On the question of the War Damage Associations he had his replies ready and had reason to believe that he could cut the ground from beneath his opponents' feet.

At the same time as the Prime Minister the President of the Chamber entered. He was a fat old man who looked like a pachyderm as he advanced slowly, leaning on a stick and dragging, not without a certain majesty, a leg stiffened by incipient phlebitis. He was wearing a tail coat, and his stiff shirt gave him a pouting chest. He seemed to be the incarnation of both the grandeur and the weariness of an old régime.

He also was one of Marthe's "great friends," one of the first, at the time when it was not she who made Ministers, but Ministers who made her.

To the weight of this old man's years had been added a difficult day. It was a moving and almost splendid sight to watch him hoist his heavy, impotent body up the steep steps that led to the Presidential desk by the mere strength of his arms; halting breathless on every step, and then see him collapse into his chair.

The strange, hundred-year-old edifice of mahogany, parquet, marble bas-reliefs and bronze heads of sphinxes that contained the secretariat of the Chamber, the stenographers below, the speaker above, and the secretaries and the President above again, was like a pyramid of acrobats in a circus whose turn was to place an elephant on the summit; the attendants on the ground were like the ring-servants ready to spread the nets. And half-closing one's eyes, one could equally well imagine certain baroque pictures representing the last judgment, in which, emerging from a cloud, could be seen the head of God the Father above a confused mass of the damned and the elect. The President of the Chamber behind the sphinxes, and Marthe in the front row of her gallery, were exactly opposite each other and almost on the same level;

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and both knew, she with the instinct of a great lover, he with his long experience of men and history, that this sloping pit which lay between them, filled with turbulent, elderly adolescents, still represented one of the greatest parliaments in the world, and the greatest, assuredly, for the quality of its intelligence and the world-importance of its debates.

The President muttered, for the sole benefit of the stenographers, a few words signifying that the session was resumed and that he was proceeding to the debate on the financial policy of the Government.

To obtain silence, rather than use his traditional bell, and from some old pedagogic habit, he tapped the edge of the desk with his paper-knife.

XIV

"I call on Monsieur Porterat!"

The cunning, absent-minded but rancorous Porterat was talking to Stenn and Simon. He did not hear his name called.

"Monsieur Porterat, I call on you to speak!" the President repeated more loudly.

As he went towards the tribune Camille Porterat raised his hand in a gesture which seemed to say: "All right, all right! I only sleep three hours a night, and never before five o'clock in the morning. We've got all the time in the world."

Then with his thumb-nail he scratched at an egg-stain on the lapel of his coat.

"Gentlemen," he began, "at the opening of a debate in which certain regrettable events will be revealed, I shall begin by examining the facts rather than discussing the men."

These words were immediately received with sustained applause, to show that his desire for impartiality was appreciated. But it soon became apparent that his neglect of "discussing the men" involved nevertheless contempt, to the point of insult, for Rousseau. Besides, Porterat had not been speaking for five minutes before he was saying. "Everyone knows that when the Prime Minister constructed, with a speed which we all appreciated in our diverse ways, his Government, he pretended to have at his disposal a miraculous loan which would permit France to achieve the rebuilding of her ruins without involving any immediate hardship for the taxpayer or the small investor. The Prime Minister will, I imagine, be willing to give us news of this loan, and to inform us if it is a fact that an important foreign financier, with whom the Prime Minister was, on his own authority, in negotiation, has cut his throat . . ."

"His wrist," someone shouted.

"What, his wrist?" asked Porterat.

"Cut his wrist!"

"Very well, his wrist, if you insist; it comes to the same thing," the

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absent-minded Porterat conceded amid laughter like cruel schoolboys'. "He will be willing to tell us, I repeat, if the sudden decease of this individual has not modified the fine financial dreams of the Government."

Porterat emphasized the relationship, cause and effect, between Strinberg's death and the Schoudler crash, went on to demand an account of the millions belonging to the War Damage Associations, and concluded by saying: "The Prime Minister, who was at that period—a very recent period moreover—Minister of Finance, will doubtless explain to us the personal part he played in the authorization given to the Schoudler bank."

Then, satisfied that he had woven and cast the net beneath which Rousseau must struggle, Porterat left the tribune to other gladiators; and began scratching once more at the egg-stain which had not completely disappeared from the lapel of his coat. The speakers who succeeded him denounced the manoeuvres of the big capitalists, grew indignant in the name of the victims of war damage, or waxed sentimental about the "small investor," but they all, in the end, agreed in blaming the Prime Minister.

Anatole Rousseau, rising to his feet, replied from his place. Confident, even slightly contemptuous, his hands sunk in the pockets of his coat, he turned his glance this way and that across the Assembly as he addressed his words to one after another of his assailants.

He had a peculiar staccato style of his own, his voice a little sing-song and rising towards the end of his sentences: originally an affectation, it had now become completely natural to him.

Rousseau spoke of the general agreement to reconstruct the devastated regions, of the necessity for creating the Associations and for authorizing the banks . . .

"It would have been criminal, Gentlemen, yes, criminal . . . to refuse private assistance . . . for services which the State could not itself assume . . .

"What bank," Rousseau asked, "could have inspired greater confidence than one, solidly based for a century, whose President was one of the Governors of the Bank of France?"

"Financial enterprises are subject to the hazards of life. Our faults, Gentlemen, are often born of our misfortunes. I shall not abandon Monsieur Schoudler . . . because he is temporarily . . . in misfortune."

This chivalrous attitude must surely arouse sympathy.

"The authorization was withdrawn in time . . . to allow of the preservation of nearly the whole of the funds of the loan . . . An inquiry has been opened. Justice will pursue its course and determine . . . responsibility, if such there be."

He concluded with a sort of defiance, directing his phrases at the Assembly and, in particular, at Porterat: "I do not see the object . . . of

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such hostility unless it be indeed that . . . beyond the facts . . . an attempt is being made to attack the men."

His speech was received with considerable applause. Rousseau had won the first round of the battle and his majority did not seem to be in danger. But now the second round began. From the benches of the extreme Left rose a dark stocky man with metal-rimmed glasses whose vocal cords seemed to have a metallic resonance.

"The Prime Minister's reply does not satisfy us," he cried. "For to this company, in which the previous speakers have allowed it to be understood there has been speculation, abuse of trust and an almost fraudulent failure . . ."

"Wait for the results of the inquiry before you make these accusations," cried the Warden of the Seal.

"... Well then, to this company," went on the dark speaker, "which *will not* be able to repay the funds of the victims of war damage—for if this is not so, Gentlemen, I ask you, why has it been necessary to file a petition against it? . . ."

"Once again," cried the Warden of the Seal, "wait for the report! It's infuriating . . ."

"To this company Monsieur Anatole Rousseau is counsel and legal adviser!"

"Hear, hear! Splendid!" people were shouting in the speaker's neighbourhood.

An electric tension began to be felt throughout the Assembly.

"What is this accusation?" cried Rousseau, pale with anger. "I ceased being legal adviser to this company, as to all other companies, from the moment I became a member of the Government, that is to say, fourteen years ago."

"But you've never ceased defending it!" cried a voice from the Left.

"Or serving it!" continued the dark speaker, pointing his forefinger at Rousseau. "It was you who supported Baron Schoudler's nomination as Governor of the Bank of France . . ."

"But they inherit that from father to son," replied Rousseau.

"And it was also you, Mr Prime Minister, who made the personal decision to give the authorization to Baron Schoudler's bank one month before it crashed. When I say that the Chamber has the right to ask you what profit you derived from this operation, I don't think I'm far wrong," concluded the speaker.

There was applause from one side of the Chamber and boos from the other. The public began to stir on the benches of the galleries and the attendants said: "Remain seated, Mesdames! Monsieur, please remain seated; it is forbidden to stand up."

And the President of the Chamber tapped on his desk and, pointing his paper-knife at the speaker, shouted at him angrily above the hubbub: "Monsieur Gouriôt, I ask you to moderate your language. I will

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not permit insulting allegations to be made against the Prime Minister unless you are in a position to produce immediate proofs!"

And boos rose from where there had previously been applause, applause from where there had been boos.

Rousseau was standing up again.

"I am accused," he said, turning proudly towards the Assembly, "of having placed my influence at the service of a private company. Doubtless, being unable to attack my administration, there is a desire to attack my honour. If the facts of exercising, of having exercised at one period of my life . . . a liberal profession," continued Rousseau, "and of having regularly received fees . . . in legitimate remuneration for those services is to constitute a basis of perpetual attack on the companies and persons who paid those fees . . . to the detriment of justice, respect for the law and the good of the State . . . who among us, Gentlemen, could escape such false and ill-founded accusations? One would have to have done nothing in one's life except be a deputy . . . or a Minister."

The little man's mind and voice were making their maximum effort.

"Do you think that subscriptions to election expenses . . . lucrative jobs for family or friends . . . cannot be considered as indirect honorariums?"

"Who are you attacking?" shouted those who felt themselves attacked. "Names! Names! . . . Your accusations are infamous!"

"No more than yours," replied Rousseau.

"Names! . . . You're not answering . . . Liar!"

The Deputies began drumming with their fists on the desks or banging the lids.

"Why is it always political lawyers who are attacked?" said Rousseau, endeavouring to continue.

"Because they're the most corrupt!" shouted the Deputy Gouriot.

"There always have been political lawyers, and there always will be," replied Rousseau.

"It was even they who founded the Republic!" Robert Stenn cried from the Left-centre, in the first place because he was a lawyer, and in the second because he saw with regret that the debate was getting off the point.

But the hubbub, far from decreasing, reached its climax. The desks banged. The deputies were hurling insults from one end of the benches to the other, and shaking their fists. They were insulting each other without even being able to hear what the insults were. Every unpleasant or scandalous affair due to the collusion of power with private interest for the last fifty years was brought up.

And the elegant, ingenuous young ladies, astonished and rather frightened, began wondering whether this very night, when they were there, wasn't the beginning of the revolution.

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The members of the Ministers' secretariats were crowded in the lobbies beyond the side of the semi-circular benches.

"The attacks to which the Government is being subjected," someone was heard to shout from Anatole Rousseau's party, "are coming from the benches where one of the immediate employees of the banker Schoudler is sitting! It's a farce!"

Simon Lachaume, who seemed to be awaiting this opportunity, raised his arm and cried: "Monsieur le Président, I ask to be called on to speak!"

"I haven't finished," screamed Rousseau.

"Gentlemen, Gentlemen," repeated the President, his elephantine head craning forward over the abyss, "I must ask the Chamber to preserve its dignity in debate . . . Yes, Monsieur Lachaume, you will be called on to speak. But let the Prime Minister conclude. Gentlemen! Monsieur Gouriou, will you be silent! Gentlemen . . . I shall be compelled to suspend the session!"

And the paper-knife tapped more and more sharply. The President finally spread out his arms in a gesture of impotence as he turned towards the Secretary-General of the Chamber. And this signified that he was going to leave the chair and go to bed, leaving the wicked children free to fire pistol-shots at each other across the floor if they so wished.

There was a slight lull.

"I am happy," continued Rousseau, "to see that Monsieur Stenn, who does not however seem to be on the side of my friends in this debate . . . has nevertheless rendered homage to a profession of which he is himself a member . . . and which has given the Republic many of its best servants."

Since half the deputies were members of the bar, there was applause from every bench. And one might even have thought that the Assembly was about to rise to its feet in homage as if it were a matter of the war dead.

Quickly exploiting his success, Rousseau, speaking with more difficulty, and less succinctly, concluded: "I am not merely, believe me, a Minister defending his position . . . or even a man defending his honour . . . but a republican saying to other republicans: 'Take care, because you are lending your aid to the sabotage of the régime and, one day soon, France will pay dearly for it!'"

With these words he just managed to win the second round of the fight. But he had shot his bolt. Besides, everyone was tired; the deputies, worn out by the previous day's sitting, intoxicated by their own shouting, exactly as if they had been having a drunken argument, no longer knew precisely what it was all about. It was four o'clock in the morning, and they felt the stubble of their beards rough on their cheeks. The session might have ended thus, with no other conclusion, and

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Rousseau was counting on this indecisive result to save his Government.

It was then that the President of the Chamber announced: "Monsieur Simon Lachaume, I call on you to speak!"

XV

Since the beginning of that Parliament Simon Lachaume had rarely spoken, and always on precise matters of secondary importance. He had never yet had to take part in so serious a debate, one in which the words he was about to utter could have such important consequences.

As he made his way to the tribune, Simon was once again astonished by the extraordinary speed with which his thoughts moved when he was on the point of speaking in public, and of the number of details he noticed on the way: the chess-board one of his colleagues was drawing on a piece of white paper, the dirty points of his own shoes, Stenn biting the knots on his fingers, the drooping forelock of an attendant, the fatigue, the disgust with men, on the President of the Chamber's elderly face. He also thought of a carpet that he had bought the week before and on which he had left a deposit. He thought of everything, save the one important, essential thing on which he found it impossible to concentrate his attention, the speech he was about to make.

Before him was the curved mahogany reading-desk, the glass of water on his right, and a tiny metal pencil forgotten by one of the preceding speakers; the tribune, with its bath-like shape, surrounded Simon. An ancient bath; Marat's bath. Tall speakers always had the impression of being in danger of falling out of it; small men, on the other hand, felt absurdly submerged in it to their armpits.

Above him, at the top of the scaffolding, Simon heard the President talking ceaselessly to the Secretary-General, with the usual old parliamentary hand's ability at once to carry on a conversation and lose no point in the speeches.

Below, Simon could see the heads of the stenographers. Then, beyond, was the dangerous void, peopled on the further bank by six hundred faces, moving, muttering, noisy, hostile and paying no attention to anything but the mistakes or idiocies of the speaker.

Simon took off his glasses the better to isolate himself from the external world. Colours and shapes became misty; everything that went to make up the great amphitheatre of the Republic looked as vague and homogeneous as a huge sandpit opened in the flank of a hill through which men and time flowed indefinitely.

"Gentlemen, I have been referred to personally in this debate. I shall not avoid the duty, imposed on me by my conscience, of furnishing the Chamber with information, which I am perhaps the only person

in a position to give, concerning this extremely painful question which has kept us here tonight . . .”

The sensation of his syllables forming themselves of their own accord between tongue and palate had a grateful and calming effect on Simon. The extraordinary and mysterious human mechanism had put itself into gear at the moment it was required; the apparatus of thought had coupled itself to the apparatus of speech, as a motor—that very motor which an instant before had been running too quickly and in the void—is coupled by a clutch to wheels or propeller.

“But you will realize, Gentlemen, that one of the most painful moments a man can endure in his life is that in which he must choose between his friendships and his conscience. I am living through that painful moment.”

A complete, well ordered, powerful and almost independent machine, his speech unrolled without a sound of grating in any of its parts. Simon had but to control that automatic part of himself which led him on and carried him forward, merely paying attention not to go astray in the flow of some too long period and to raise his voice in the difficult passages of reasoning or emotion. And to see where he was going, he put his glasses on again.

Immediately below him, on the Government bench, he made out the face of Anatole Rousseau, his thick white hair, his bird-like eyelids, his features exhausted by age, struggle and protracted anxiety. Simon remembered the day, now nine years ago, when the Minister had made him, a poor little schoolmaster, get into his luxurious car, and had kindly shared with him his fur rug; Simon had not known that day whether he should put his bowler hat on his head or hold it on his knees.

And now the Minister was staring at him and, in his upturned eyes, there was astonishment, supplication and fear, like an old man about to be crushed against a wall, unable to control his limbs even to escape death.

Simon felt the latent emotion of the situation and put it to good use, better use than he had foreseen.

“Everyone knows, Mr Prime Minister,” he cried, addressing Rousseau directly. “that I began my career under your auspices. How can I ever forget those months I spent with you, at the Ministry of Education and at the Ministry of War, where I learned from you what it is to be a Minister, what the State is, and what are the overriding interests of the Nation . . .”

The Chamber, exhausted by the tumult of the past hour, stupefied by the length of the session, having reached the point where men who have been insulting each other have but a vague idea of the original reasons for their quarrel, had fallen almost silent and seemed impregnated by the quality of the emotion existing between Simon and Rousseau.

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Simon Lachaume was aware of his own treachery, of the considered, premeditated, organized betrayal of which this speech from the tribune was but the accomplishment and goal. His was the luck, very rare in the life of a politician, that his betrayal appeared to accord with the good of the country; and he was clever enough to give the impression, by means of a false frankness, that he was the victim of a tragic conflict.

Having rendered homage to Rousseau and paid tribute to the gratitude he owed him, Simon did the same with regard to Schoudler. Assemblies who have exhausted themselves discussing ideas are generally delighted to have their attention recaptured by talk of men.

Simon explained how Schoudler's megalomania had disordered his affairs as it had his mind.

"It is true," said Simon, "that for many long years I was first in the direct and then in the indirect employment of Monsieur Schoudler. It is true that until a few days ago I was the manager of a daily newspaper of which Monsieur Schoudler was the principal shareholder and president. It is also true that, in spite of my devotion to the newspaper, to its staff and to its readers, in spite of all my desire to save it from catastrophe, I felt obliged to resign the day Monsieur Schoudler began sending instructions written on thousand-franc bank-notes."

This revelation astounded the Chamber.

"What absolute nonsense!" cried Rousseau, who saw where Lachaume was leading and was beginning to get angry.

"Nonsense?" replied Simon. "Look, Mr Prime Minister, see for yourself."

He took from his coat pocket the bank-note Schoudler had sent him and read in a loud voice: "'No repercussions. The paper should adopt the official version. I shall replace Strinberg. That is all. Schoudler.' That, Gentlemen," Simon went on, waving the note, "that is the man to whom the State gave its guarantee."

There was considerable stir on the benches, indignant laughs, shouts. Rousseau turned pale.

"But I knew nothing of it! He didn't send me a bank-note!" he cried.

"He sent you others!" someone shouted from the Left.

"It's monstrous, infamous! I will not allow . . ."

"Gentlemen, Gentlemen, really!" cried the President of the Chamber, tapping with his paper-knife. "Monsieur Gouriot, I shall be forced to call you to order. Gentlemen, silence please! This debate is producing a spectacle of which you should be ashamed. It is impairing the dignity of our Assembly!"

"I imagine, Mr Prime Minister, that a long personal friendship, even if not bound by common interests, encouraged you to close your eyes to Schoudler's singular behaviour during the last few months," Simon went on, his voice restoring a relative calm to the benches. "But

you could not, Mr Prime Minister, have been ignorant of the fact that the Associations' funds would be used to support Monsieur Schoudler's personal position. The affair was settled at luncheon, on the 14th April, between him, Strinberg and yourself . . ."

Tumult started again in the Assembly; arms were waved in accusation.

"That's the explanation of the whole thing!" the deputies cried, as if they had never in their lives taken their places at a business man's table but had always had their meals alone in a public restaurant.

"I acquired this information, Gentlemen, from the Prime Minister, then Minister of Finance, himself . . . And you were so little certain of the soundness of the scheme," Simon continued, turning back to Rousseau, "that when you came away from the luncheon you asked me what I thought of the position of the two financiers."

"Oh, this is too much!" cried Rousseau, banging his desk with his fist. "It was you yourself, Lachaume, who told me over the telephone that Schoudler's position was as sound as Strinberg's."

Rousseau's little hand pointed in frenzied indignation towards the tribune.

"I beg your pardon, Mr Prime Minister," replied Simon, who was perfectly calm and almost ironical. "I said: 'Schoudler's position doesn't seem to me any sounder than Strinberg's!'"

"Oh, this is monstrous!" cried Rousseau, his features distorted, turning about as if he were seeking behind him, on the benches of the Chamber, witnesses to his good faith.

Then Robert Stenn rose and, his arms crossed, said movingly: "Really, Gentlemen! Does one pledge the State's guarantee merely on a telephone call!"

Nearly every group applauded him.

"Who was this financier Strinberg?" Simon went on. "We all know, Gentlemen: he was one of those feudal chieftains of international capitalism, standing on the summit of a pyramid of vassals, of whom one of the best minds in this Assembly" (and Simon was careful to point to Robert Stenn) "said but a few days ago that they are merely adventurers whose field of adventure is the small investor."

As he spoke, attacking his old patrons and borrowing, with subtle politeness, the thoughts of his friends, Simon assumed an astonishing authority. Each word he uttered was hammered home.

Leaning forward with both hands on the tribune, he went on: "A child of the people, a State scholar from the beginning to the end of my education, and profoundly attached to the principles of liberty and equality before the law which permit men such as myself to come to this place and express the conscience of the people, I can neither encourage these feudal chieftains of finance, nor associate myself with those who support them, use them or serve them."

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He was interrupted by lengthy applause. And now Simon knew that it was not only his speech he could control, but the whole Assembly.

"Strinberg is dead," he went on, "bringing ruin to thousands. The loan for the reconstruction, the promise of which won the Prime Minister the confidence of Parliament, has not been made. On the contrary, the funds of the war-damage victims have been swallowed up in the crash of the Schoudler bank, the credit of the State is gravely compromised, and the victims of the devastated areas are still sleeping in huts."

Robert Stenn, frowning, felt vaguely anxious. According to a well-prepared plan, he had thrown Simon into the assault so that he might not only rid himself of all suspicion, but might also make those necessary revelations concerning Rousseau which would facilitate the Prime Minister's removal from office. In his own mind Stenn had reserved himself to come to Simon's support if he should find himself in difficulties, or, preferably, to follow after him and use the arguments provided to attack Anatole Rousseau. And here was Simon doing the work himself, and doing it well; and he would get all the glory of it. "However," thought Stenn, biting the knots on his fingers, "the essential thing is that Rousseau should fall. And a success for Simon will only strengthen our party."

Marthe Bonnefoy, who had listened to her young lover's speech first with great excitement and then with pride, suddenly thought: "Now he's arrived, and for the rest of his life. He has understood. Oh no," she thought, "he won't be drowned saving corpses . . . He'll surely go far, and I'm delighted . . . But I think he no longer needs me."

Then she lost interest a little in the speech, took her mirror from her bag, and began searching the benches behind Robert for young deputies with interesting ugly faces, as if it were a fish-pond in which, for the last time, she might plunge her hand at a venture.

"As far as my management of the *Echo du Matin* is concerned," said Simon, "I place the accounts of my administration at the disposal of the Commission of Inquiry which will undoubtedly be appointed."

No one as yet had mentioned such a thing. Anatole Rousseau received it like a knife in the stomach. The old man shrivelled up on his bench; a look of childish anguish came over his face, as if he wanted to say to Simon: "Why talk of a Commission of Inquiry? Why this added cruelty? Why do you have to do this to me?"

With his finger Simon wiped away the sweat he felt beading his upper lip.

"The Chamber will therefore understand," he concluded, "for the reasons I have mentioned, that it is impossible for me, in the interests of the Republic itself, to give my support any longer to the actions of the Government; and I believe I can say that the whole party to which I belong will take the same attitude."

Simon came down from the tribune, acclaimed, sullied and triumphant.

Rousseau raised his eyes to the President of the Chamber as if to ask him what he should do; the stout old man who, every fortnight, saw a Government collapse at the foot of his rostrum like a pack of cards, assumed an expression which meant: "Nonsense! You know as well as I do!"

Anatole Rousseau half-rose, leaning on his desk, and said: "In these circumstances, Gentlemen, I ask for a vote of confidence."

Then some of his Ministers surrounded him and spoke to him; but he did not seem to be altogether aware of what they were saying; his breathing was obstructed, as if his heart was weakening, and little red streaks appeared in his eyes.

"Are you feeling ill, Prime Minister?" one of his Ministers asked him.

"No, no, quite all right," he replied.

At seven-fifteen in the morning Anatole Rousseau's Government was defeated by three hundred and sixteen votes to one hundred and thirty-eight, with a hundred abstentions; a demand for the nomination of a Commission of Inquiry was approved by the same number of votes.

In the hall of the Four Columns Simon, surrounded, congratulated and already envied or hated by some, was taking stock of his own importance: he had destroyed his first Government.

He suddenly saw Rousseau. The old man had no hat and was trying to slip his arm into the sleeve of his overcoat. He had got his hand entangled in the lining and was nervously trying to thrust it home, looking a little ridiculous, touching and unhappy.

Simon, embarrassed, wondered for a moment what he should do and if, in the circumstances, there was any precedent. He decided to go and speak to the man he had just destroyed.

"Listen, Prime Minister," said Simon, "I'm extremely sorry, but really in all conscience . . ."

And he automatically put out his hand to help Rousseau into his coat.

"There is no conscience," cried Rousseau; "well you know it, and there is no longer a Prime Minister, there's nothing left, nothing but little swine like you and general filth . . . You, you, Lachaume, to have done this to me! . . . You've had Schoudler's skin and now you've had mine! But you'll see, one day, you'll see . . ."

He broke away with a sudden movement; there was a sound of splitting silk in the sleeve of the overcoat, and then Rousseau seemed to pivot round in a curious way and put his little hands to his forehead as he moved off.

The party to which Simon belonged met at once in the room reserved for them, so as to agree on the first plans for the important

political day that was about to begin. It was clear that Robert Stenn would be charged with the formation of the new Cabinet, clear too that Simon Lachaume would take his place in the Government, at least as an under-Secretary of State.

When they had been deliberating for a few minutes, someone came into the room and said: "Rousseau's had a sort of attack. He went up to the Prime Minister's room to fetch his briefcase and collapsed over the table . . ."

Everyone instinctively looked at Simon. He went to the window and drew aside the heavy double curtains. Bright daylight flooded into the room, dimming the lamps, brutally showing up the fatigue on the grey faces, the cigarette-ends in the ash-trays and the smoke-laden atmosphere. The political night was over.

Crossing the cobbles of the courtyard of the Palais Bourbon Simon saw a slowly moving group, urgent, careful and clumsy; in their midst was a little old man with thick white hair and too-high heels, supported under the armpits as they carried him unconscious, his head jerking and his body limp, towards the open door of a car.

Simon could not help remembering another car in which an old woman sat collapsed. And as on that other occasion, he murmured: "It was he or I." For his destiny was clearly to rise in the society of men and to trample on the heads of the old who had carried him in their arms.

CHAPTER FOUR

One Foot in the Grave

THE year 1929, which had opened with the death of Foch, had just come to an end with the death of Clemenceau.

Before the first buds had appeared on the chestnuts in the capital, a gun-carriage, preceded by the clink of bayonets and followed by the boots of Princes, the subfusc trousers of Ministers, the cocked-hats of Ambassadors and Academicians, the robes of the Judiciary and the University, slowly bore the remains of the warrior through huge, sad crowds.

The statesman, as he had wished, was buried in his Vendée garden among the last of the falling leaves.

Never had the expression "national mourning" been more apposite than on these two occasions.

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The French nation was attending the obsequies of its own importance, of its primacy among allies, and of a certain kind of greatness which it would never know again.

Then the sculptor Landowski set about casting, for one of the finest tombs in the world, the eight bronze soldiers who, in an alcove of the Invalides, were to bear on their shoulders the Marshal's sarcophagus. As for the President, his was the right to a statue, whipped eternally by the winds, on that major artery that runs from the Place de la Concorde to the Arc de Triomphe.

Between the deaths of these two shadowed caryatides who had seemed to uphold the spinning globe of the days, the year 1929 had seen one of the ministers who had signed the Treaty of Versailles condemned to prison, the first talking-film, and the beginning of the world economic crisis on that day, the 29th October—one of the most important dates in the century—on which the New York banker Faber had lost some twenty million dollars in the Wall Street collapse.

It was a rounded, balanced year, with method in its catastrophes, a year which the future would look on as a dividing line between two epochs.

By their passing from flesh into bronze, the two men of Victory marked, symbolically and in fact, the end of the post-war period.

A new generation, who had left a million and a half of its members dead on the field of battle, had now in its turn come to power and, amid the dislocation of world economy, would merely have time to prepare new catastrophes.

II

One morning in the following spring Professor Émile Lartois stopped his car in a steep narrow street in Ville-d'Avray. On the rusty railings there was a notice, announcing in faded letters on an iron plate: "Les Eglantines—Family Boarding-house." The famous doctor crossed the sad strip of garden, glanced at the three spindle-tree hedges, the iron bench, the little plaster statue battered by the rains, climbed the steps to the porch, and pushed open the door with its stained-glass panels.

"Monsieur Schoudler," he asked of the fat woman in a black skirt who met him in the hall.

Professor Lartois shut himself off from the ugliness about him by contemplating his own features in the looking-glass on the hat-stand. The sight of his smooth grey hair, his broad forehead, his delicately rosy complexion, unaffected by the years, of his fine well-kept hands, was always an aid to thought or a remedy for boredom.

But the man who appeared, a few moments later, on the stairs seemed to have passed through the hands of a theatrical make-up man.

His complexion white, his features ravaged, his shrunken neck emerging from a stiff collar which was much too large, Noël Schoudler had

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even given up the beard which had once been so very well known. He now wore a grey Newgate frill like a Breton fisherman. About his shoulders was an old evening cape, and as he came down the narrow pitch-pine stairs, he managed to assume a trace of pomp; but the muscles of his face, from the effects of strain, twitched spasmodically, and he seemed on the point of tears.

He gave the doctor his left hand, because the right, which he concealed behind his back, was shaking to and fro among the folds of the cape.

"You're the only one," he said, "the only one, do you realize that, Lartois, who has come to see me since I've been here? Schoudler will not forget it when he has recovered his place in the world."

Still with his left hand he fumbled for his eye-glass which hung from a ribbon of moiré silk; it had a special gold mounting which he embedded in the fat about his eye.

"It does me good to see you," he added.

"Well, my dear friend, come out and have luncheon with me," said Lartois, forcing a smile to hide his embarrassment.

An expression of regret and anxiety crossed Noël Schoudler's face.

"The fact is," he said, "I haven't warned them here and they're very kind . . . Indeed, I told them that I had a guest today . . . So I'd rather not . . ."

"Splendid, splendid," replied Lartois, uneasier every minute.

The ex-Governor of the Bank of France led the Academician to the dark dining-room, where the table-cloths were stained and napkins knotted about the necks of the half-empty wine-bottles.

As he passed an old woman with a curiously thin face and enormous, bulging eyes, Noël Schoudler said with a bow: "Good morning, Comtesse."

The old woman's terrifying face registered a smile in which there lingered a memory, retained by herself alone, of ancient seduction.

"A Russian great lady; all her family were executed by the Bolsheviks," explained Noël Schoudler, whispering into Lartois's ear. "Personally I don't use my title here; I can see no point in it."

The stooping, shrunken old giant sat down, gazing round the walls with their paper patterned in violet and yellow stripes.

"Yes," he went on, "I'm not uncomfortable here. You've seen the garden, it's very pleasant; the air's good; and quite shortly, owing to the fact that people are leaving, I shall be able to have that table over there by the window. But of course all this is only temporary."

When not actually talking he tended to leave his mouth hanging open.

A waiter, his long wrists emerging from a dirty coat, came up to the table.

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"Ah, here's Teddy," cried Schoudler with affected good humour. "Teddy looks after me very well; he was a barman in a ship."

Lartois's uneasiness increased with the accumulating signs of decay.

"Well, I was really second barman," said the waiter in a low, rapid, anxious voice. "In the *Champollion*. Besides, Teddy isn't my real name, it was the head barman who called me that. That's right, Marseilles-Alexandria, Alexandria-Marseilles, all the time."

"Really?" said Lartois politely. "I once travelled in the *Champollion*. She's a fine ship."

An expression of panic came over the waiter's face, with its deeply sunken eyes, deathly-pale cheeks and rotten teeth.

"What year was that, Monsieur?"

"In 1924, I think," said Lartois.

"Ah, yes, of course, that was before I got the job," said Teddy hastily.

He was shaking as he gave them their plates and very nearly dropped the water-jug. Charitably Lartois looked away from the little mythomaniac, who had never been nicknamed Teddy and had clearly never been a barman in the *Champollion*, except possibly for twenty-four hours while the ship was in dock—time enough to get the sack for incompetence—and who lived in terror of his own lies, which were so utterly unimportant that it never occurred to anyone to verify them. For Teddy, too, the Eglantines must have been the only refuge. And Lartois's gaze returned to Schoudler, who was listening with interest, his tongue out.

"Well, and Rousseau? How is he?" asked Noël Schoudler, recovering himself.

Lartois did not dare tell him that the former Prime Minister lived sunk in a chair, refused to clean his teeth or eat anything at all for fear of being poisoned, and would suddenly burst into tears, sobbing: "I want some stewed fruit; I want some stewed fruit; I want some stewed fruit . . ."

"He's better, he's recovering slowly," said Lartois.

"Yes, we shall climb back together," said Schoudler. "But you really can't imagine, my dear fellow, what they did to me! I was dragged in front of the magistrates . . . But of course you know all that, because it's thanks to you that I was left at liberty because of my health. But they wanted to throw me into prison! Rosenberg was splendid too!" (Rosenberg was Schoudler's lawyer.) "He proved, legally, that the Associations' funds did not constitute a true deposit, and that I was only bound to return the equivalent, and therefore that the accusation of embezzlement could not hold water. And then he also showed up all the political machinations. If I'd been given a little time, I could have fixed everything. But you can't imagine the wickedness and hatred that I had all round me. I saw my grandson one day with a black eye. I asked him how he had got it. 'I was in the schoolyard,'

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he said. "They said my grandfather was a swindler. So I had a fight..."

Under the influence of excitement the movements of his right arm became terrifyingly exaggerated.

The giant interrupted his talk to help himself to lentil salad. It was a laborious and delicate operation. Schoudler seemed determined to help himself without assistance. Lartois did not dare come to his aid and filled the silence with small talk. Schoudler succeeded in getting a spoonful on to his plate; but the second spoonful fell from his hand and the lentils flew all over the cloth and even into the glasses.

He abandoned the struggle with a sigh, let the spoon fall into the salad-bowl, took his right wrist in his left hand, succeeded in limiting the spasmodic movements of the arm, or rather in progressively reducing their extension, as if the sick limb had belonged to some other, independent body, a chicken for instance, whose struggles he was endeavouring to control. Then the left hand put the right hand on the table, holding it until the twitching was limited to the forefinger scratching at the cloth. In short it was a victory! But to achieve it the old banker had had to concentrate his attention and will-power with the result that the whole lower part of his face sagged. From his wide-open, rather shrivelled mouth his tongue gradually emerged in little jerks, the point turned upwards; and Noël Schoudler, with his sea-dog's beard and his eye-glass ribbon, looked like a target at a country fair.

He suddenly realized what was happening to him, and the jerk with which he drew in his tongue made his eye-glass fall from his eye. Then his arm started its frenzied dance once more and the whole performance began all over again, while an expression of mingled exasperation and distress appeared on the old man's face.

"A splendid example of senile chorea," thought Professor Lartois. "What marked symptoms, what amplitude! And the sad part of it is that the mental deterioration is delayed; probably the frontal lobes are not yet affected, and only the corpus striatum is sclerotic. Mentally he's no worse than before the disaster. Indeed, clinical pictures are never complete."

"They took everything from me, I had to sell everything," Noël Schoudler went on, "even my wife's rings, even my son's pearl studs, do you realize that, Lartois? The pearls he wore in his shirt-front, the four portraits in my study and the decorations I wanted Jean-Noël to have one day. Jacqueline had to buy them secretly, and put them in store. She's also lost a lot, poor child; three-quarters of all she had. Yes, she's the only one who's been kind. She even sent me a little money, without her husband's knowledge, I think. But I'll soon give it back to her..."

Teddy moved to and fro among the tables, with a quick, rolling gait,

carrying the trays low as if he were crossing a ship's saloon in a swell, and every now and then he replied: "Yes, sir!" to a client.

"You can imagine, Lartois," continued Schoudler, "what that last morning in the Avenue de Messine meant to me. There was not a piece of furniture left, not a curtain, not even the stair-carpet; and not a servant of course. I had to pack my own trunk. I went from one room to another through the whole of that great house my father built, which I first entered when I was seven years old. You don't know how the steps of an old man alone in an empty house can echo. Then I went down to the kitchen to see if I could make myself a cup of tea. I realized that in ten years I'd probably not entered the kitchen more than four times. And it was there that I suddenly realized that I had ruined my grandchildren."

The old man's face was shaken with spasms again; the hand twitched more frenziedly, and caught in the ribbon of his eye-glass, breaking it.

Fortunately the eye-glass itself was not smashed; but a terrible business began when Schoudler tried to thread the ribbon through the eye on the rim.

"Here, let me do it," Lartois said at last.

"They demanded a hundred and twenty-seven million; in the end they managed to get a hundred and twenty-three," said Schoudler. "I owe the other four. Do you think it was worth doing me so much damage for four million? Don't you suppose I'd have been able to find them? All the same, they left me this," he added, indicating his rosette of a Commander of the Legion of Honour, now so worn and dirty that the metal was visible under the silk covering.

The old woman with the enormous eyes—"exophthalmic goitre; and surely she must have a cardiac condition," thought Lartois—having finished her luncheon, came over to them and said to Noël Schoudler: "Would you like the newspaper?"

"Oh, thank you, Comtesse," said Noël, half-rising from his chair. "Would you care for a cigarette?"

The two old people did this every day, an exchange of economies.

"I did not introduce you," said Noël, when the Russian Countess had left the room, "because she would have talked for hours. I read the newspaper particularly for the small advertisements," he went on. "I'd never looked at them before. They're extremely interesting, did you know that? One can find in them the whole economic activity of the country. I shall get back again very soon. There are still plenty of ideas in here, lots of ideas..."

He tapped his forehead with his left forefinger.

"Oh, the other day a most extraordinary thing happened to me," he went on. "I saw in the paper an advertisement saying: 'Young married couple desire agreeable guest for luncheon.' I telephoned; I went there. It was at least a meal, you see, and then I thought it was good

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for me, I need to make contacts! I introduced myself: 'Baron Schoudler'. They didn't seem in the least surprised; they were a nice little couple. A good luncheon. I am, I believe, an agreeable guest. And suddenly the woman upset her glass. I didn't think there was anything odd about that; it might easily have happened to me. But the husband suddenly turned nasty, shook his finger at her and said: 'You've upset your glass again. You know what's going to happen.' 'Yes, yes, I deserve it,' the woman replied weeping. They rose to their feet; he put her under his arm, pulled up her skirts and spanked her. And then they came back to the table and sat down again as if nothing had happened. That was it, my dear fellow; that was why they had invited me! A man who needed to spank his wife in front of a stranger. You must admit that the world is full of lunatics."

He put out his hand towards the newspaper.

"No," he said, "I'll have plenty of time when you've gone. But Lartois had the feeling that Schoudler's thoughts were now completely concentrated on the mysteries contained in those little abridged lines in which he sought the face of hope. And to the doctor this obsession seemed more painful than all the rest.

He put down his cup of pallid, bitter coffee.

"You must come and see me one day and I'll give you a thorough overhaul," he said, rising to his feet. "You'll see, I've got splendid apparatus; I'll take your blood-pressure and X-ray you."

"My leg hurts at times," Schoudler admitted timidly.

"We'll have a look. We'll see what can be done. I'm sure you've got a young man's heart," Lartois replied.

At the door his eye was again shocked by the torn rosette the Baron was wearing.

He quickly took off his own and put it in his friend's hand, saying: "I've got several of them in Paris. Whereas here I don't suppose the shops . . . When you reach our grade, they're rather difficult to find."

III

Professor Lartois had nearly all the faults which cling like lichen to a man who has been endowed with too many gifts at his birth, too much success in his youth and too many honours in his middle age. He had nevertheless the religion of friendship. The day after his visit to Ville-d'Avray he went to see Simon Lachaume, who was now under-Secretary of State for Fine Arts in the Stenn Government, the only combination which had had any stability for a long time. Moreover, having arranged, after the Schoudler crash, that his party should buy the *Echo du Matin*, Simon was a part-owner of the great daily and held a controlling position in it.

"My dear Lachaume," declared Lartois in his rather whistling voice,

throwing his head back, "my dear Lachaume, you have no right to leave this man in the state of wretchedness in which he now is, reduced to reading the advertisement-columns in a newspaper that was once his own property. It's monstrous! I am quite aware that he has committed every sort of folly, but that doesn't alter the fact that, if he had not created this business, you would not be here at this moment; I mean you and others. Well! I think in one form or another the business should, I don't say pay him a fortune, but at least ensure him enough to finish his life in comparatively decent circumstances, allow him to buy a couple of shirts and take a taxi. Schoudler has been part of the life of Paris, and for a very long time. When I think of the receptions he used to give, the projects and ideas that used to revolve round him, all the people to whom he, directly or indirectly, gave a start..."

He drew breath.

"It's perhaps not very clever of me to talk like this," he added, "but I can't help remembering, my dear Lachaume, that your first article appeared in this paper, and that it was I, I believe, who got you commissioned to do it."

Simon was too clever, and too sure of himself these days, to show annoyance at a reminder of this kind. On the contrary, he extended his hands towards Lartois and cried: "But of course I remember! The death of Jean de La Monnerie; and the words he used to designate you as his successor in the Academy. Do you know, I've always kept your letter of the following day in which you told me that you had put my name forward to write that article? It is to you, my dear friend, that I owe everything that has happened to me since. Yes, indeed! But I did not know, I assure you," he went on, "the details of Schoudler's situation. Thank you so much for telling me; I'll look into the matter at once and see what can be done... My dear and illustrious friend," said Simon, as he showed the Academician out, "I have a feeling that the star of a Grand Officer is in prospect for you. Nothing's decided; all the same, I have a feeling that perhaps in the honours list of the 14th July..."

And Lartois, who had arrived thinking: "That Lachaume is really a little swine; I'll give him the edge of my tongue!" left saying: "At bottom he's not a bad fellow at all!"

Simon Lachaume did not fail at the *Echo's* next board meeting to inform the board of Schoudler's position and express a wish, as if it were his own idea, that something should be done about it. Everyone was touched by his generous concern.

The result was a letter in which the *Echo du Matin* offered Noël Schoudler a monthly salary of nine thousand francs (nearly equivalent to the salary of a chief editor) as technical adviser to the financial column. It was made quite clear that any suggestions or criticisms he

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might care to make would be received with the greatest interest, but that he was not obliged to put in regular attendance.

Simon was sufficiently tactful not to sign the letter himself.

No charity could have been more courteously offered, nor could it have been made clearer that Schoudler's presence was not required in the office.

This letter was for Schoudler the beginning of his Hundred Days. He packed at once, took a taxi from Ville-d'Avray to the Place de la Concorde, got the porter of the Crillon to pay it off and, putting his tongue out at the reception clerks, asked for a suite on the best floor.

"The idiots! The idiots!" he kept on saying to himself. "I knew it. They can't get the paper out without me. In six weeks' time I shall be in control again!"

He at once began giving a series of luncheon and dinner parties "to make contact again." He invited pell-mell old friends, old enemies, Members of Parliament who had lost their seats, ministers who had held no portfolio for ten years, utterly useless characters, swindlers he had met the day before, and people in search of quick profits. He could not hear a scheme mentioned, a project of any kind, without saying: "Come and see me, come and see me. We'll look into it. I shall have very considerable capital at my disposal." For some time he was the patron of a strange society of failures, swindlers and dupes, men who had once had a bit of luck, and others who, never having had any, still believed that, though they had passed their sixtieth year, they were on the right road.

Schoudler always wore his evening cape, limped a little and terrified the customers in the hall of the hotel.

He went every day to the *Echo*, where his fisherman's beard was to be seen leaning over the editors' desks, knocking, unawares, the pens and inkpots of the draughtsmen to the floor, and then, downstairs, creating confusion among the compositors.

First on the pretext of looking for a paper, then slyly sitting sideways on a table, and finally by definitely taking up his position in the chair behind the desk, he regained possession of his office, and Simon, when he arrived, did not know how to dislodge him.

At the end of a month Noël Schoudler's expense-sheet had reached a hundred thousand francs. He was then asked, with considerable firmness, to return to Ville-d'Avray, and was told quite simply that the paper would pay the monthly bill for his living expenses.

"It's forced residence, exile!" Schoudler cried.

Simon lowered his eyes and shrugged his shoulders in a gesture of helplessness.

The wood smelt of violets. The long-nosed country gentlemen, who could take their pleasures only in bad weather, had grumblingly beaten a retreat before the scent of flowers and the warmth of the air. The hounds were in their kennels, the hunt-members in their châteaux. The forest, deserted by the daffodil-yellow coats, had been given over for several months to a vegetable silence, the rising of the sap and growing nature.

The Marquis de La Monnerie, surprised to be still alive—"death is keeping me waiting in its antechamber," he was accustomed to say when asked about his health—had abandoned the rhythm of his winter days and the long hours of dozing and waiting beside the gryphon chimney-piece, to adopt the rhythm of summer.

Every evening, when the weather was clement, the blind man, having dined very early on various milky foods, had his armchair carried out in front of the more austere of the Mauglaives façades, on to a sort of natural terrace which overlooked the village. There, a rug over his knees, his crown of white hair leaning against the back of the chair, the Marquis listened for two hours to the noises of the village and the countryside. The last wagons were coming home; the chains clinked on the flanks of the unharnessed horses; the stonemason's saw stopped. Then the smith quarrelled with his wife; there was a crying of scolded children, the noise of spoons in bowls, and the loud splashings of dish-water being emptied from basins into yards. Then the air became cooler, stiller, and the voices louder in the peace that fell on the world. The high cliff of Mauglaives, like the quarry at Syracuse, echoed the whisperings of families sitting at their cottage doors into the old nobleman's ears, as he sat above them at the door of his fortress. Urbain de La Monnerie, through these voices rising to him in the evening, learned many things about the life of the village, about marriages, illnesses, adulteries and births; he knew what the Curé had said to Grangeaume's wife, whether the corn would be heavy in ear, and the price of a ton of hay; he also heard his peasants talk of him, Jacqueline and Gabriel, of the servants . . . But none of this had much importance for him; it was merely a distraction which might repeat itself indefinitely, for he had forgotten every morning what he had heard the evening before, and as, more and more frequently, these noises, these voices, tended to become a gentle, confused murmur in which he could no longer distinguish isolated words or precise sounds, the Marquis wondered whether he were not losing his hearing as he had lost his sight. He felt himself to be dying inch by inch in proportion as his senses and faculties failed. Loss of memory, some loss of ability to think, blindness, tomorrow deafness perhaps, one day paralysis of the limbs . . .

"I wonder," he thought, "what we preserve to enable us to recognize

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each other up above . . . Well, I suppose that God must surely provide us some means of doing so, some other sense . . .”

On these days he contented himself with breathing, savouring the air with which he filled his nostrils, his ancient lungs, his shrunken and hardening arteries; and that was enough to give him satisfaction. The consciousness of being alive was the only pleasure remaining to him. And his was a wise nature for, instead of being vexed by the extreme narrowness of his limitations, he succeeded, on the contrary, in enjoying this last resource.

One evening, when he was in this state of semi-attentive somnolence, of vague meditation, he heard a step coming along the terrace which was not that of any member of the staff. It was Commandant Gilon, somewhat out of breath, and the Marquis had the impression of a great hornet who he feared would buzz about him all evening.

“My dear friend, I’ve come to give you a not very good piece of news,” the old Dragoon said at once.

“Oh, really! What’s the matter?” the Marquis asked.

“Well, our dear friend Madame de Bondumont . . .”

Gilon had used the word “our” as a sign of discretion and complicity.

“Odile, yes,” said the Marquis. “Indeed, I haven’t seen her for some time. When did she come here last, I can no longer remember?”

“She’s very ill,” said Gilon.

“Oh, what’s the matter with her?”

“Her heart; well, a bit of everything.”

The Marquis coughed.

“Is she dead?” he asked.

“No, my dear friend, no, I would tell you so at once, you may be sure!” replied Gilon, who added after a pause: “No . . . not yet.”

Then he anxiously awaited the old man’s reaction. But there was none.

“It may be a question of hours. I think you ought to go there,” Gilon went on.

“It’s really terrible to impose the fatigue on the old man,” he thought; “besides, though he feels nothing at the moment, he may very well get a shock when he gets there . . .”

Once again destiny was leading Gilon to take part in other people’s affairs and to serve as messenger in a matter of some delicacy, where his rudimentary diplomacy put him rather at a loss.

“Yes, yes, you’re quite right, I must go,” said the Marquis. “I’ll tell them to put in the horses.”

“No, I’ll drive you, I’ve got my car here. You’ll be much more comfortable and we’ll get there much quicker.”

“Oh, yes, of course! You’ve got a motor-car!”

The old man rang the bronze bell with the wooden handle, which lay beside him on the grass. Below, among the roofs and barns of the

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village, it sounded like a little knell and the peasants said to each other: "Listen! There's Monsieur le Marquis ringing for Florent earlier than usual. Is it because he's not well or because the Commandant has just arrived?"

Florent came out on to the terrace, his chest wheezing, his feet scraping along the ground.

"Florent, bring my things!" ordered the Marquis. "I've got to go to Joinvry."

The old butler hurried back into the château.

"I wonder now, should I tell him straight away, or shall I wait till we're on the way," thought Gilon, who had only accomplished one part, and that the least delicate, of his mission. "If I tell him now, perhaps he'll jib, or want time to reflect. If I tell him only in the car, it'll look like a trap. Why on earth did I get myself involved in this? After all God can't care a damn. I ought at least to have brought the Curé; that's what I ought to have done! I always think of things too late. No, I haven't the right, I must tell him now."

He clicked his tongue against his gums, in the gap left by his dentures, so as to give himself courage.

"Your friend," said Gilon, "is about to receive the last sacraments."

"Yes, of course she must!" the Marquis replied.

"She desires—don't be offended by what I'm going to say; I'm only transmitting her wishes," Gilon went on, stuttering a little. "I can speak frankly, can't I? There has existed between you and her, if I have properly understood the matter . . ."

"What? What are you trying to say? That she's been my mistress?" said the Marquis somewhat impatiently. "Well, yes, of course, you well know it. One can't hide these things for ever. The important thing is not that it should be hidden, but that people should not talk about it too much."

"Well, your friend wishes to receive another sacrament at the same time, for which it is necessary that you should be present, so that she may appear before God without sin," Gilon continued. "In fact, to be perfectly frank with you, she wishes to die married to you. There!"

"Ah!" the Marquis said simply.

Florent returned at this moment, his arms laden. He helped his master on with his overcoat, tied a woollen scarf about his neck, slipped knitted gloves on to his hands, as if, once outside the walls of Mau-glaives, one emerged suddenly from springtime into December.

The blind man was led to the car and carefully installed, his stick between his knees.

"And the worst of it is," thought Gilon as he drove away, "that all this should happen while Jacqueline and Gabriel are in Paris. I could of course try to telephone them, but it would take hours. They may not

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be at home. Besides, in any case it wouldn't make any difference. I know Jacqueline. Devout as she is, she'd be sure to think we were doing the right thing. The only point is whether we shall get there in time."

The road to Joinvry was covered with bumps and pot-holes. Gilon drove as quickly as he could, avoiding as many bumps as possible, and from time to time he turned to look at the eighty-seven-year-old fiancé whose betrothed might well be dead by the time they arrived.

The unforeseen, the night air, and the sound of the motor seemed to have stimulated the Marquis. He remembered having once been driven by Gilon before, on the occasion of his brother's, the General's, funeral in the Church of the Invalides.

"I never thought I should have another reason to leave Mauglaives," he said suddenly.

The universe of the old, reduced first to park or garden, then merely to a corner of garden, then to a single doorway, then to a room isolated by a staircase never again to be descended, then to trousers and coat on the back of a chair, never again to be worn; indeed, death, inexorably, restricts the old till they occupy no more than a space limited to the precise dimensions of their own bodies, even to the opening of the tomb.

Urbain de La Monnerie was rather pleased with his outing; it interrupted the monotonous, the daily increasing, limitations of his life.

He was aware of the object of the journey. He was going to Odile, to "regularize things" in some way. He had said neither yes nor no to Gilon, not out of prudence, but merely from indecision, from a sort of insolvency of the will. The idea of this marriage *in extremis*, of this act which was at once grave and purely theoretical, of this engagement which applied only to acts which were over and done with, aroused in him no more than a few echoes on the slack strings of memory.

For the moment he allowed himself to be led on, without realizing it, by the circumstances and the will of others.

He had had a wife, Mathilde, whose fine black hair and pale face he often recalled. The most beautiful woman in France, he judged, after the Empress. Unfortunately she had been too narrow-hipped. The child had died too. By way of revenge Urbain could no longer remember where Mathilde's portrait was hung in Mauglaives.

Why had he not married Odile, when she had become a widow more than twenty years ago? Fear of seeming ridiculous in the first place; he had already reached the age when people are generally celebrating their golden weddings: and then there were also the questions of convention, principle and custom. Odile was by birth bourgeois, as were indeed the Bondumonts. The only time she had ever mentioned the subject of marriage to Urbain, he had harshly silenced her.

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"Legally or not," he had replied, "I shall never install my mistress at Mauglaives. There are too many reasons against it."

In twenty years Odile had never mentioned the subject again.

Gilon braked the car and, at the same moment, the Marquis from the depths of his night had the impression of seeing a little yellow glow. "Dear me, I've seen something!" he thought.

"The swine didn't dim their headlights!" Gilon cried.

The other car passed with a rattling noise.

The Marquis was really delighted with his outing. It was a long time since his senses and mind had been so active.

V

When they arrived at Joinvry, Urbain de La Monnerie made an effort to imagine a big, long, low house with a high mansard roof. But he saw the house covered with a red network of virginia creeper in autumn, whereas the walls at this moment were thick with climbing greenery.

Three steps to climb to the front door, one to go down to enter the room on the left . . .

"I am the Abbé Prochet," someone said, making the old parquet creak beneath his heavy boots.

"Oh, good evening, Monsieur le Curé," replied the blind man, extending two fingers above the handle of his stick.

The Curé rushed at these two fingers and shook them carefully, bowing as if he were about to kiss a bishop's ring.

"Allow me, Monsieur le Marquis, allow a priest," he said, "to congratulate you respectfully on what you are about to do. It's a good deed, a very good deed, for the repose of her soul, and even for yours, Monsieur le Marquis."

The floor creaked again beneath another step.

"Here is Monsieur le Maire," said the Curé.

"Ah well, I see everything has been prepared," said the Marquis.

One step up to go into her room. "There's nothing like houses on one floor for having steps everywhere," thought Urbain de La Monnerie, remembering a remark he had made twenty times.

"Good evening, Odile," he said in a firm voice. "So it's not going too well, eh?"

No one answered him.

"Well," he went on, raising his voice, already out of patience, "why don't you say something?"

The silence was unbroken, but for the imperceptible rustle of a hand against a sheet.

The Marquis could not see the eyes full of hope, gratitude, admiration and love that the old woman turned towards him. The vertical

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wrinkles on her face had narrowed and multiplied to such an extent that she looked like the edge of an old book or a stale *mille-feuilles* cake.

Gilon gently took the Marquis by the arm and led him into the next room. "We're coming back straight away," said Gilon, replying to the anguished concern in the dying woman's eyes. "She can no longer talk," he went on, addressing the blind man when they had passed through the door. "Her last words were to ask for your marriage. One cannot even be quite certain whether she can still hear."

The Curé approached.

"For witnesses," he said, "there's the Commandant, isn't there? And then, I think, one might ask Madame Bondumont's maid to sign."

"Oh no!" said Urbain de La Monnerie. "If I'd been told that sooner I'd have brought my butler or my huntsman. But I won't have a maidservant I don't know."

And they felt that on this point the old man was adamant.

"Well," suggested the Curé, "Monsieur le Maire might sign the Parish Register and I could sign the Civil Register."

"I don't know whether that's really legal," replied the Mayor, scratching his head. "And yet I don't really see why not."

"We must have everything in proper order," said the Curé.

They looked at each other in perplexity.

"Why not go and fetch Doué? He lives quite close," cried the Marquis.

"Splendid, an excellent idea," said Gilon. "I'll go and get him. Come and sit by her in the meantime; I'll be as quick as I can."

He led the Marquis down the step into the room. The Curé brought up an armchair. Then, when the old man had sat down and had removed the woollen scarf Florent had put on him, which made the blood mount to his head, Gilon took his hand and placed it on the sheet. Then the blind man received in his dry and withered palm the hand of the old woman, its fingers pressed together, a hand like a little plucked bird.

The two old lovers, of whom death had already obscured the eyes of one and had now seized the other by the throat, sat there motionless for many long minutes. Suddenly the bed shook, as if the old woman had burst into laughter or sobs. It was merely that her body, regaining a little strength at the contact of the beloved hand, was beginning to tremble again from neck to knees.

The Curé and the Mayor, sitting side by side at a table, both fat and their nails not over-clean, both writing in their registers, looked like great schoolboys indefinitely continuing their lessons.

"On the 29th May 1930, at 22 hours, before us, publicly appeared . . .

"I beg your pardon, Monsieur le Marquis, what are your Christian names?" the Mayor asked.

"Urbain Antoine Jacques . . . Wait a minute, I had another."

"Oh, it doesn't matter; that'll do. And Madame Bondumont's maiden name?"

The Marquis drew a deep breath. "Moulinier," he replied morosely.

"Do you know her date of birth?"

"We can leave that blank; we'll fill it in tomorrow," whispered the Curé, feeling that this interrogation was irritating the Marquis and might compromise the whole business.

"Yes, but it's not very legal," the Mayor repeated.

"After all," murmured the Marquis, addressing no one in particular and still holding Odile's limp hand, "one only belongs to the class one deserves."

At this moment Gilon's car was heard returning; doors opened to allow the entry of the obese Vicomte de Doué-Douchy, who was wearing the old pumps he always put on when dining alone in his château.

"Oh, it's you, Melchior, you've been disturbed," said the Marquis.

"That's all right," replied the ex-representative of the deceased Pretender to the Throne.

The presence of the obese Viscount, with his white-of-egg complexion, his goatee, and the pale surround to the pupils of his eyes, seemed to bring into relief and lend a new precision to all the details of the room, to the little dusty baldachin over the dying woman's bed, the dim light of the lamps, the smell of medicines and age clinging to the faded *toiles de Jouy*, fly-blown and in places rotted with damp. Gilon noticed that Melchior de Doué had a large growth on his temple, half-hidden by the line of his hair.

The civil formalities were completed in a few seconds.

"I take the articles as read," said the Mayor. "I declare you united before the law."

"We'll sign the two registers together," whispered the priest, who felt there was need to hurry, because the dying woman's breathing had taken on a disturbing rhythm and fleeting shadows were passing across her face.

The priest curtailed the prayers as much as he could. Turning to the Marquis he said: "Do you take Odile to be your wedded wife, according to the rights of our Mother Holy Church?"

"I do," declared the Marquis firmly.

"Do you take Urbain . . ."

The old woman was no longer able to distinguish sounds, but she could follow perfectly what was happening. Her "I do" was announced by a vague rattle in her throat and by a despairing glance from her little eyes hidden among the vertical wrinkles.

"Ego conjugo vos in matrimonium . . ."

With a quivering effort the old woman lifted the Marquis's hand to her mouth, and held it feverishly for a long moment against her thin,

worn lips, savouring at last the granting of a dream which had dominated her life for twenty years.

They had to separate their hands, the hand like a dead branch and the hand like a frozen bird, so as to guide them to the two registers and make them draw strange lines which in no way resembled the signatures that had once been theirs.

Exhausted by this last effort, it seemed to the Marquis that not only his eyes, but also his limbs, had become blind. Still sitting, his head with its white crest bent forward, while the Curé, using the six little pieces of cotton prepared on a platter, administered extreme unction to the old woman, he fell asleep. She too.

When Gilon woke him, he did not tell him that Odile was dead. In any case Urbain asked no questions, allowed the woollen scarf to be placed about his neck and himself to be led back to the car.

The following morning he slept later than usual. The day after that he had completely forgotten about his marriage and never spoke of it again.

VI

The liaison between Marthe Bonnefoy and Simon Lachaume, though it had cooled off, had not altogether come to an end. Marthe never broke with her lovers. It was merely that Simon's photograph, since he had become an Under-Secretary of State, had taken its place on the chimney-piece. And when from time to time Simon stayed a night, or rather half a night, at the Quai Malaquais, it was the past—though still a flesh-and-blood past—that he held in his arms.

Simon, as he advanced into his forties, was tormented by a double need, on the one hand to discover a great love, and on the other to accumulate the possession of the greatest possible number of women, of women's bodies. The squaring of the circle, in short, which was made all the more difficult by the obligations of power, affairs and public life.

In fact it was Sylvaine whom Simon asked, more often than not, to fill in what he called "the interim."

Following on his somewhat inglorious departure from the Rue de Naples in Wilner's company, Simon had sent the actress flowers, then invited her out to dinner one night when there was no performance.

Little by little Simon, when he foresaw that he would have a spare moment during the week—fearing, too, that this spare moment would be one of loneliness—had formed the habit of telephoning Sylvaine. She was generally free too, or managed to make herself so.

Their relationship was marked by an amused cynicism. The circumstances in which they had first known each other, and then met again, were not such as to inspire much mutual esteem. But their positions in the Paris world were mutually flattering. Their thoughts, or at least

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their conversation, suited each other. And there was a quality of frankness between them which somewhat resembled complicity; far from trying to bluff each other about their respective pasts, they spoke of them frankly. Moreover, and above all, they suited each other sexually very well; where she had ardour, technique and an utter lack of modesty, he had a robustness which was not devoid of subtlety.

They were perfectly aware of all this and did not hesitate to talk of it. They looked on each other as good companions, indeed perfect ones.

In fact they were two people of the same nature and of equal strength, and each of them unconsciously was endeavouring to prevent the one stealing a march on the other.

One day in the middle of June Simon Lachaume met Isabelle, one of his first mistresses. Isabelle, her body thickened by unused hormones, her eyes ringed in black, her hair dark and her glance vague, seemed, as always, anxious and indecisive.

"Well, what are you doing these days?" asked Simon with the same kind of professional, automatic manner in which he would have spoken to a painter, a journalist or a civil servant.

"I don't know," she replied. "I may be going abroad. Unless of course I go and hunt with Jacqueline next season."

As she talked, she kept putting on and taking off her tortoiseshell spectacles, as if, in her morbid indecision, she was uncertain whether she wished to see clearly, wished not to detract from her looks, or wished really to see clearly.

"What I should really like," she went on, "would be to adopt a child. I've been thinking about it for some time. Now that I've reached the legal age for it . . ."

"And even rather passed it," thought Simon.

"The only thing is, how do I set about it? I mistrust the adoption societies. I might be given anyone's child . . . you know, Simon, I often regret . . ." Isabelle added, taking off her glasses and raising her eyes sadly to him. "However, don't let's talk about that, it's no good, since I'm sure you never think of it any more!"

Simon reflected for a moment.

"Wait a minute, my dear," he said. "I've got an idea. I may have the means in my power of making three people happy."

He had just thought of the child, or rather the pretended child, of Sylvaine, the little girl survivor of the adventure of the *jumeaux blancs*.

Sylvaine paid for the keep of the little creature whose legal mother she was, but otherwise gave her no attention at all.

She thought she had more than done her duty by boarding the child out in a Dominican Convent from the age of four.

"I'd like to be able to say," declared Sylvaine, "that I'd been brought up by the Dominicans!"

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Simon thought, too, that there would be an ironical touch about bringing back this child, imputed to Maublanc and the cause of so much drama, into the orbit of the La Monnerie family.

"And have you seen the child?" Isabelle asked.

"Yes, I saw her once. She looks very sweet. I'm sure it would be a good deed. As you can well imagine, an actress cannot look after her. The real mother, who has disappeared—she's married and lives in the country, I think—is clearly in a very small way. But the father, from what I've been told, was a member of the upper classes, indeed someone of our sort."

The next day Simon told Sylvaine of his idea.

"Oh splendid, that would be perfect," she replied.

During the following week there was not a day on which Simon was not telephoned by Isabelle. She asked for additional information; she wanted a photograph of the child . . .

"And you're quite sure there's no legal risk of the real parents reclaiming her one day? You do realize, don't you, that it's a terrific responsibility?"

Simon was beginning to regret his initiative when finally, one morning, Isabelle triumphantly declared that she had decided to adopt the child and asked that it should be brought to her as soon as possible.

VII

The following Sunday Simon went to the flat which Isabelle, as a result of saying, "I'm going to move . . . No, I think I'll stay . . . Yes, I'll move as soon as I can find something I like . . .", had kept unaltered since the death of her husband Olivier Meignerais.

Simon was carrying in one hand a small red-fibre suitcase and was leading with the other a little girl of seven with a wide, flat forehead, dark, glowing, brilliant eyes, delicate features, chestnut hair fluffed about her face like parsley, then curling down to her waist, and an excessive, indeed disquieting sobriety of demeanour.

"Here's Lucienne," Simon said.

The little girl in the white dress did not smile. Her gaze had a sad and slightly provocative intensity. One felt that she was accustomed to keeping quiet, to observing, and then keeping quiet again.

"Simon, it was written that it should be you who would bring me my child," said Isabelle emotionally. "She's really pretty," she added, lowering her voice; "a little shy, I think, but I'm sure she's adorable."

When Simon had left, Isabelle sat down, drew the child to her, and said: "And now I'm your Mamma."

"Yes, Madame," said little Lucienne.

"So from now on you'll call me 'Mamma'."

"Yes, Madame."

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Isabelle did not press the point. She felt embarrassed, helpless as if face to face with a creature of another species. The child's eyes seemed to be filled with a mysterious emotion like that visible in the eyes of weaned puppies behind kennel bars.

Isabelle automatically looked at the palms of the child's hands, examining the lines already lightly marked on the silken skin; but Isabelle knew no more about palmistry than she had learned from various men who had pretended to pay court to her—which is as much as to say that she knew nothing.

"Run along, you can do exactly what you please," Isabelle said. The child wandered slowly through the flat, looking at everything, touching nothing. From time to time an expression of astonishment crossed her face when she looked up at a chandelier or gazed at the ivory ornaments on the chimney-piece, or at the bindings of the books. One felt that, if she only dared, there were many questions she wished to ask.

Isabelle had the child's bed made up on a divan in a little room leading out of her own.

For three successive days Isabelle, so as to have her meals with the little girl, refused all invitations. She took her to the Parc Monceau and bought her a large teddy-bear. Lucienne's face broke several times into a smile that slightly dilated her delicate nostrils and clouded the gravity of her gaze with a flutter of eyelashes.

And on the evening of the third day, when Isabelle went to tuck her into bed, Lucienne threw her arms round her neck and whispered: "Good night, Mamma! You know, I used to say 'Mother' to the Sisters, but I've never said 'Mamma' to anyone; I didn't know what it meant."

Isabelle turned her head away, and went and wept for joy in her own room. She foresaw her old age in the company of a tall gay young girl, and then of a tall young woman, who would always call her "Mamma" with that sweetness which brought a lump to her throat.

But the next day Isabelle had to go out to dinner. When she handed the child over to the housemaid and gave her her instructions, she saw a dumb reproach in the child's eyes, a mixture of hardness and distress that pained her.

The following day Isabelle met Commandant Gilon at a tea-party.

"My dear Isabelle, where are you going for the holidays?" he enquired. "I'm going to Biarritz. We shall be a lot of friends there. Why don't you come with us?"

Then Isabelle began to be perplexed. Of course she would never indulge in any adventure with that nice Gilon. But on occasion he paid her a discreet and gentlemanly court which amused, occupied and flattered her. Besides, who could tell? At Biarritz she might meet the man who . . . And if she did not go to Biarritz, she would not meet him. She couldn't go to Biarritz with the child, unless she took a governess, which she couldn't possibly afford; for otherwise she would

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not be free. And supposing she met a man who did not care for children? . . .

The fear of losing this useless, illusory freedom, this freedom which for the last ten years had been no use to her whatever, became a sort of panic. The child she was about to adopt would entail the end of hope, renouncement, her entry into the world of old women.

A thousand times during the days which followed, Isabelle put on, took off, and put on again her tortoiseshell spectacles, as she struggled to make up her mind between contradictory desires.

And then, when Sunday came, she telephoned Simon.

"I've decided not to!" she said. "I shan't adopt her! I can't."

Then Simon, thoroughly annoyed, returned to fetch the red suitcase and the little girl in the white dress, whose hair curled like parsley.

"Goodbye, Mamma," Lucienne said.

"You must forget me, darling; you must no longer call me 'Mamma'," said Isabelle, pushing her quickly towards the door.

The child's face contracted, grew rigid, and her round dark eyes filled with tears.

She placed her hand in that of the man in the grey suit, who represented destiny. She carried her teddy-bear under her other arm.

On the staircase Simon felt more moved and more to blame than he had at the collapse of Rousseau or Schoudler, or even at his mother's death.

When they reached the street the little girl threw the teddy-bear into the gutter.

"It'll do for some poor child," she said.

She did not cry.

Simon took her back to Sylvaine, who took her back to the Dominicans.

And the relationship between Simon and Sylvaine continued as before.

VIII

The greater part of Jacqueline's fortune and everything that ought one day to have gone to the children had been swallowed up in the Schoudler crash.

Jacqueline had feared that this semi-ruin might have painful repercussions on her marriage. But this was not the case. On the contrary, Gabriel showed himself kinder, more attentive, more relaxed, and sentimentally speaking the months that followed the crash were certainly the happiest of their marriage.

Gabriel would doubtless never really have loved Jacqueline if she had not, with unconscious perseverance, cultivated in him a jealousy of the dead man. In the same way certain women succeed, consciously

or semi-consciously, in provoking passionate feelings in the man with whom they live, merely by always looking and smiling at others.

Yet love, when it is based merely on the narrow, cutting edge of jealousy, can be satisfied only by victories of pride. Everything therefore that could diminish the name of Schoudler, tarnish the aura which surrounded it, reduce the pedestal (at least Gabriel thought so) on which was based the memory of François, was welcomed by the ex-Spahi as being to his advantage. Faced with the disaster in the Avenue de Messine, Gabriel gained stature in his own eyes. Jacqueline would never now be able to say to him in a moment of anger what indeed she had taken great care never to do, but which he always feared she might: "All the same, you're prepared to live on what François left me."

And thus Gabriel was in the paradoxical position of having married Jacqueline for her money and being delighted at her partial ruin.

But he had the tact to clothe his satisfaction beneath the appearance of sober resignation. "Did we not marry for better for worse?" he seemed to say to Jacqueline. And she was much touched by such greatness of character.

Moreover, for the first time since he had left the army, Gabriel's time was occupied. Overwhelmed with paper-work, Jacqueline had finally handed it all over to her husband.

"Oh," she said from time to time, "if only poor Polant was here, she would be such a help to us, because she knew about everything and had a wonderful memory."

But the La Monneries' and Schoudlers' old secretary, who had always appeared at moments of crisis, who knew how to draw up the announcement of a death and how to lay out the deceased, had died four years earlier from an abscess on the liver.

Gabriel's work consisted basically in going to see the solicitor, the stockbroker and the new banker, who looked after their affairs, and getting them to explain to him things of which he was completely ignorant, so that he might later repeat them to Jacqueline with a fine assurance and as if they were decisions he had reached unaided.

He thereby wasted a great deal of time but gained in importance. His wife was continually thanking him by a glance, a silence, a pressure of the hand or a kiss.

During the whole of this period they lived almost continually in Paris, in the Rue de Lubeck.

Another result of these events was that Gabriel had improved his position in Madame de La Monnerie's estimation.

"You know, my poor Gabriel," she confided to him one day, "I was always against Jacqueline's first marriage. These banking families, something always goes wrong."

Gabriel, who had never thought that he would derive such comfort

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from the old lady's opinions, immediately began to take notice of them.

The De Vooses were still a long way from being in financial difficulties, and since their way of life had never been extravagant, they were not compelled to alter it.

The legacies from the two uncles, the General and the Diplomat, consisting largely of gilt-edged securities, had been almost completely saved. It was not much, of course, in comparison with what had been lost, and in view of the appalling general decline in values. But there was also, in a London bank, a safe-deposit containing gold which had not been touched; it had doubtless been forgotten by Baron Noël.

Moreover, Jacqueline was reassured by the fact that she could look forward to the huge landed property of Mauglaives, which she was bound to inherit shortly, and on the revenues of which she already lived free for six months of the year. The agent and the solicitor might well say from time to time: "Take care, Madame la Comtesse, the Puyromée farm is in need of repairs . . . There's a mortgage on the Vacherie lands . . ."; but thousands of acres of woods and agricultural land were not like feathers to blow away in the wind.

Gabriel, having wearied himself for several months learning the work of a solicitor, was one day able to bring Jacqueline triumphantly an exact account of her reduced capital holdings and a valuation of the wealth which she still possessed. In the presence of the legal terminology, the columns of figures, the neat lines ruled in red ink, Gabriel had that satisfying sense of order, of precision and perfection, which in the old days he had felt at a squadron inspection.

And precisely as, on those evenings after an inspection, his mental well-being had impelled him to lose his pay playing poker or drinking till dawn, Gabriel immediately decided to buy a new car, which Jacqueline could really not refuse him.

Gabriel chose his car from among the fastest and most luxurious, with a special body, handsomely upholstered in red leather; he merely chose one of three horse-power less than the last—so as, he said, to economize on petrol.

From then on he had nothing to do but play with his new toy, begin consulting his watch again without cause, and await the date at the end of June which was essentially important to Jacqueline and himself: the anniversary of François's death.

Gabriel awaited the approach of this day rather as a sufferer from malaria, who believes himself to be cured, awaits the return of the period of the year during which he normally has his attacks, and with the same mixture of hope and apprehension.

During the week immediately preceding the anniversary, Gabriel noticed that Jacqueline had no longer that absent, yet concentrated look which he had noticed in previous years. Was this relaxation

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natural, was it the result of time and forgetfulness, or was Jacqueline making an effort to control herself? In any case Gabriel looked on this change as a personal victory. He did not realize that the mere fact of admitting to himself that this painful anniversary was an event in his life constituted a defeat. Neither of them said a single word that could remind the other of the approaching date.

The night before, Jacqueline and Gabriel wished each other good-night rather more curtly than usual, avoiding each other's glance, for each knew what the other was thinking.

Naturally Gabriel did not go to Jacqueline's room; besides, their physical relations, though still happy, had become somewhat less frequent, and there was not even a danger that this sign of tact on Gabriel's part would appear at variance with their habits.

Gabriel would know on the morrow whether he had really triumphed over the dead man.

The following morning, coming down to breakfast—for since their "ruin" they had taken to the English custom, when in the Rue de Lubeck, of having breakfast in the dining-room, which in point of fact was not justified by any economy, not even that of the servants' legs, since their duties were complicated by having to take early-morning tea up to the bedrooms, but which nevertheless was in keeping with an attitude of moral dignity—Gabriel was astonished not to find Jacqueline.

"She has gone to the anniversary mass for François," explained Madame de La Monnerie.

"Oh yes, of course! It's natural that she should," replied Gabriel.

"What? What's that you're saying?"

"I said that it was natural she should," Gabriel repeated more loudly, sincerely believing his words.

"Yes. You know," went on Madame de La Monnerie, "one does it because one has to. Take me for instance. I have a mass said in memory of my husband every year. Considering the happiness he gave me, thinking of him one day in the year is amply sufficient. What? What's that? Come in!"

Jacqueline returned shortly afterwards. She did not look upset and had composed her features.

"It's pouring with rain!" she said. "I got soaked. It's not what you expect in June . . . I've still got to go to the cemetery. But, really, in this weather!"

She said it as if it were a matter of some tiresome obligation.

"I'll drive you there," said Gabriel, quite normally.

"No, really, darling, I won't ask you to do that."

"But of course I will! It's no trouble!"

She allowed herself to be persuaded by these civilities, because she also wanted to see if Gabriel were really cured of his malady.

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In the early afternoon, therefore, Gabriel drove her to the gate of Père Lachaise.

"I shall only be a moment," she said.

Gabriel automatically looked at his watch. Jacqueline bought an armful of flowers and disappeared.

When she returned half an hour later—the avenues in the big cemetery are long, and then Jacqueline had not been able at once to find the gardener to whom she always gave a yearly tip, and then the white vase in which she generally placed the flowers was broken—Gabriel was no longer in the car.

"He must have gone to buy something," she thought. Her attention was still absorbed by the effort she had made not to weep while kneeling by the tomb in case Gabriel should notice it.

She got into the car and waited.

Her fingers, to have something to do, stroked a stag's slot which hung from the rear-view mirror.

It was not the slot of the blind stag; Gabriel had had that particular trophy mounted on the traditional oak shield, with a brass plate bearing the date and circumstances of the death. The slot hanging in the car was from a stag killed on a particularly happy day during their engagement, when Jacqueline and Gabriel had hunted side by side and almost alone. The plaited skin was now hard and flexible, rather like a life-preserver.

"Monsieur le Comte is very wise to have it with him," said Laverdure. "One never knows, driving at night, and nothing makes a better life-preserver. I always carry one in the van."

But Gabriel kept it in his successive cars only as a fetish of memory. "As long as he keeps these childish things, it shows he loves me," Jacqueline thought.

But as the minutes passed she began to feel a dull anxiety, as well as a certain irritation.

"Really, he must have forgotten me. What can he be up to?"

Another half-hour went by, then another quarter of an hour, at the end of which Gabriel reappeared, his face scarlet, his jaw set, and his fists clenched. He roughly pulled the door open.

"Oh, so you're there!" he said, without looking at Jacqueline.

The back of the seat was tilted forward, and Gabriel pushed it back with his foot, kicking the handsome red leather. He smelt strongly of anis.

Jacqueline felt her face and limbs grow cold; she closed her eyes.

"This is it! It's all over. It's going to begin all over again," she thought. "It's my fault! I was a fool to think . . . So much the worse for me . . ."

Gabriel stalled the engine three times trying to start the car. He then drove dangerously fast through the crowded, slippery streets.

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"Gabriel, please, I thought it was all over," said Jacqueline in the most gentle, tender, imploring voice she could manage, placing her hand on her husband's arm.

"Yes, so did I," he cried, "I thought it was over, that everything was over!"

Shaking off Jacqueline's hand, he made the car swerve, then continued on the same terrifying course.

"Is the Schoudler tomb a big one?" he asked a little further on, in a falsely calm voice behind which hate was gathering, while the car, travelling over the wet surface of the street, grazed the bonnet of a bus with its wing.

"Yes, fairly," Jacqueline replied, trying to be calm.

"Because, in that case, you might as well take your bed there!"

There was a sound of cars crashing into each other behind them, but they had already gone on. Then Jacqueline bowed her head, took it in her hands, and silently allowed the tears, which she had restrained at François's tomb, to flow.

And from that moment their marriage consisted once again of three people, of whom the intruder was sometimes the dead man and sometimes the living.

IX

The heat of summer began to weigh over Paris. The Grand Prix was over and many people had already left. Near the Place de la Concorde the bourgeois young swam in the Deligny baths, where the water was filtered.

One morning a telephone call from the manageress of the Pension des Eglantines summoned Professor Lartois urgently to Ville-d'Avray. Lartois found Noël with a cold leg, a swollen, violet-coloured foot and white toes; it was an unhealthy whiteness, rather grey and transparent, with a dark circle at the joint as if gangrene had marked with a pencil that part of his body which had already been appropriated by death.

Lartois perfectly understood the evolution of this disease in which death struggles with the living body—capturing a nail, then a little muscle, then the bone, and then a whole joint.

Taking refuge behind technical terms—which doctors do not use, as is generally believed, only out of vanity and to increase their importance before the ignorant mortal, but much more often so as to place a screen between the patient and his disease—Lartois said in a calm voice: "Well, my dear friend, you've got arteritis, with the beginnings of necrosis."

The new disease now manifest in the old Baron's body was of the same nature, of the same arteriosclerotic origin. Above there were thick, hardened little channels that failed to irrigate properly the central

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grey matter in his brain; below, the femoral artery was obstructed and contracted, and failed to irrigate the leg.

"I expect you've been having considerable pain?" said Lartois.

"Yes, particularly at night; it hurts like the devil!" replied Schoudler, his hand flapping on the sheet.

"Poor chap, I can well believe it!" thought Lartois. "He's already got a foot in hell."

"Is it serious?" Schoudler asked.

"Yes, fairly. But we'll fix you up," Lartois replied. "The only thing is, we may have to amputate. But what the devil! You've seen it happen to others. You're a man."

And he thought: "It would be much better for him if he died tonight of heart failure. . . ."

Noël felt an appalling anguish piercing him to the marrow because his last and only friend had just said to him: "You're a man," exactly as one speaks to little children.

That very evening Lartois had him admitted to one of Professor Chellières's surgical beds.

Chellières was a tubby, thickset man, bald but for a few tufts of reddish hair about his skull. His forehead was furrowed with wrinkles, and his bright blue eyes seemed always to glow beneath his eyebrows.

His obstinate, rather squat features might, in anyone else, have expressed ambition for power, brutality or an exaggerated idea of his own importance; but in him they expressed, essentially, understanding and human kindness.

Professor Chellières's face was not the mirror of his soul; or rather, perhaps, his features expressed force and one is not accustomed to seeing force used for good.

When he seized a patient by the wrists as if he needed these two contacts, these two poles, to let his own current flow through the body of his fellow human being, even the most despairing wanted to live.

He examined Schoudler. Then for a quarter of an hour or more the two doctors debated: "A high or low amputation?"

"You know, I don't like the knife. I like to use it as little as possible," said Chellières. "If we can save his heel, he'll still have a chance of being able to walk, a little at least."

"Well, you can see his general condition," Lartois said.

"Yes, yes, of course. . . ."

"And supposing, later on, we have to amputate again?"

"Well, we'll have to do it. In his condition a major amputation is a mortal risk in any case. One might as well put it off as long as possible. One can never tell!"

Louis Chellières was the same age and a medical contemporary of Lartois; their abilities and reputations, each in his own line, were similar.

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The use of the second person singular between two elderly men who have reached the height of their fame in the same profession—even if these two men, because their careers have been too closely parallel, do not very much like each other—has always something profoundly moving about it for those who admire them and receive the benefit of their knowledge.

Thus, when Lartois and Chellières, the two "great men," walked side by side through the white corridors of the huge factory devoted to the prolongation of human life, an instinctive silence fell over the nurses, the house surgeons and the students.

"What are you doing at this moment?" Lartois asked.

"I'm researching," the surgeon answered. "I believe I've found, precisely for this type of disease, a means of reducing pain and avoiding amputation. It may take me another five years to perfect the technique. Perhaps more, but I shall get there. What are you doing?" he added.

"Oh, I'm on the third volume of my *Universal History of Medicine*, and it's not finished yet. You know," Lartois went on in his ironical, rather whistling voice, "when it's a matter of making a chronological exposure of medical error from the Bible—because the Bible's a therapeutic treatise as well as everything else—down to you, it takes some time!"

"And when are you going on holiday?" Chellières asked.

"I'd thought of going next week. All my arrangements are made. I've let my incurable patients die. I've told those who never had anything the matter with them that they're cured. But now I don't know. Everything depends on him," said Lartois indicating the door behind which Noël Schoudler lay.

Then Chellières realized that Lartois had not the insensitive, cynical heart that people believed; he himself did not wear his true mask either.

X

His hands gripping the bar of the hospital bed behind his head, and his fisherman's beard raised towards the ceiling, Noël Schoudler was fighting pain.

"When are they going to come? My God, make them come soon!" he groaned through his clenched teeth.

Jean-Noël, leaning on the end of the bed, gazed at the old giant's body emerging from a sort of tunnel formed by the sheets over the metal cradle. Beneath the grey hair on the neck the tendons seemed to rise and fall to a sort of rattle. The torso was reduced in size by disease.

The crisis seemed to diminish; the fingers released the bar; the beard was lowered; and the child saw the chink of light between the fat lids

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staring at him. Noël Schoudler said: "I've got to go back on the operating table again, you know, Jean-Noël."

And he put out his tongue in a terrifying way.

He had had the front of his foot amputated sixteen days earlier. But it was not healing properly, circulation had not been restored to the leg, and the pain had begun again with increased violence.

Noël Schoudler had asked to see his grandson. It seemed to him that he had a great many things to say to him. The child had just arrived on this Thursday morning. But Noël could not succeed in condensing into words the fog of thoughts and emotions which had been floating about his head during these last days.

He succeeded in saying: "You must look after your sister. It's your duty. She's a very nice girl, but it seems to me that her disposition isn't altogether what's required in a young girl in our world. So . . ."

What he had just said had moved him in some inexplicable way, indeed to such an extent that he had to stop while his face became contorted as if he were about to burst into tears. But, indeed, any words he said which concerned the past or the future, the dead or those who would live after him, were imbued for him with this power of emotion.

Jean-Noël took a step backwards because the iron of the bed was shaking under his hands. The spasmodic movements which shook the old man's body were transmitted to the bed.

Noël Schoudler raised the sheet and, with his good hand, began massaging his bare knee, which quivered as if it were electrified.

"My poor leg, my poor leg," he murmured. "I think this time I can say goodbye to you, eh? This is our last moment together."

Then Noël Schoudler opened the drawer of the bedside table, took out of it a hundred-franc note, the last, and a large pair of gold cuff-links engraved with his monogram.

"There," he said to his grandson, "they're for you. Your initials are the same as mine. And the money, that's for your holidays!"

"Thank you, Grandfather," said Jean-Noël.

"No, no, don't thank me. I ought to have given you so much more. If only I had died ten years ago. What's the use of it all, what's the use?"

At this moment pain attacked him again. The old man threw his hands back and clung once more to the bar, groaning: "Ring, Jean-Noël, ring. I want the nurse. I want them to give me an injection."

The sweat trickled down his hollow temples.

As the nurse did not come, Noël began shouting: "Murderers! They'll leave me to die! Murderers. They're experimenting on me; I know it. They want to find out how much pain one can bear . . . Jean-Noël, go and telephone the Prefect of Police, tell him you're my grandson and that they're murdering me, that an enquiry must be made into the running of the hospital, or I shall start a campaign in my newspaper . . ."

The nurse arrived with the morphia-syringe in her hand.

"Well now, well now," she said.

"Murderers," muttered the old man, holding out his thin arm.

Then the nurse went out, and Noël Schoudler remained waiting silently in a tense immobility, as if he were counting the seconds which separated him from the soothing effect of the drug.

Jean-Noël, sickened by the stuffy heat laden with the smells of drugs and disease, looked about for a chair. But the only one was encumbered with a basin. So the child leaned against the bed again.

Since his earliest childhood Jean-Noël had always been rather frightened of his grandfather, of this irritable and all-powerful giant. The death of François Schoudler (concerning which Jean-Noël did not yet know the truth) had merely served to increase in the child's eyes the old potentate's overwhelming prestige.

And now that deep chest like a breastplate was no more than a narrow torso with sticking-out ribs, sown with a few white hairs; those redoubtable hands, which once had been able to raise Jean-Noël six feet above the ground, were now but long, bony, quivering extremities; that leg of a Colossus, around which Jean-Noël, aged four, had put his arms in order to be carried through the drawing-rooms in the Avenue de Messine, was now disappearing piece by piece . . .

"This damned stuff's no good," groaned the old man. "It's water . . . They've put water in their damned syringe . . . Oh, my poor little Jean-Noël! . . ."

And the old man leaned forward, biting the edge of his sheet so that his grandson should not see him weep.

"A Schoudler never cries . . ." This also was destroyed in Jean-Noël's attentive mind; as, a few months earlier, in face of the reality of the headlines in the newspapers and the insults of his school-fellows, his belief in the infinite wealth of his grandfather had been brutally destroyed and as now, during the last half-hour, had his belief in the strength of those who had been born before him.

"You know, I've got to go back on the operating table," said the sick man once again. "They put a mask on your face, and then you fall, fall into the dark like a stone . . ."

The fear of that endless fall under the ether made him perform automatically that lifelong gesture of his: that of carrying his hand to his heart, to the heart which had never had anything wrong with it but the anxieties of life and was still, on its own, obstinately bent on living within the shattered body.

Jean-Noël realized that his grandfather was frightened, and that he probably always had been frightened. Jean-Noël well knew this vague, latent, traitorous apprehension; but he thought he suffered from it "because he was young."

For the first time he felt affection for his grandfather; for the first

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time he felt that he was of the same human blood; he went up to him and gently stroked his head and the back of his neck.

"Yes, yes, that does me good . . ." Noël Schoudler murmured. "My mother used to do that to make me go to sleep . . . François, your father, ought to be here at this moment."

Certainly Jean-Noël was no longer afraid of his grandfather. But another terror, and a much more serious one, assailed him, the terror of feeling, at the age of fourteen, suddenly stronger than the idols of his first childhood. For the hope of achieving security, when he grew up to be like those idols, was vain; from now on, all security was banished from the earth.

"Don't stay any longer, my child," said the old man softly. "It was very kind of you to come."

He was beginning to feel the beneficent effects of the morphia and had no other desire but to enjoy them.

Jean-Noël went away, carrying with him a folded bank-note, two little gold objects which tinkled in his pocket, and a feeling of human frailty: the whole of his inheritance.

XI

At about eleven o'clock the trolley was brought up from the operating theatre. Baron Schoudler's face, surrounded by beard, looked as though it was on a plate of fur.

His flaccid eyelids were closed and his cheeks sunken owing to the removal of his false teeth. The open mouth revealed the naked gums and his tongue had retreated towards the pharynx. His face was red. Two male nurses, seizing the sheet, let the great body slide from the trolley on to the bed.

A nurse immediately applied a plaster to the patient's chest; then, fastening his arm to a wooden plank, she inserted the needle from which drop by drop for many hours the serum would flow from the large flask suspended from a bracket.

"Is that all right, Monsieur le Professeur?"

"Yes, yes. We must wait now till he comes to," replied Lartois, who had entered behind the trolley.

He was still wearing his white coat and cap. He sat down by the bed and took the patient's pulse. It was a question of waiting. He had plenty of time; he had arranged to have plenty of time.

After half an hour Noël Schoudler stirred a little, asked inarticulate questions, vomited, and slid back into his dark sleep.

After about an hour Professor Chellières, having finished the six operations for that morning, appeared. He was tense and tired, his thoughts engaged by six bodies behind the doors of six rooms; six bodies in which his hands had intervened to alter the curve of destiny.

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For better or for worse? He could never know, he could never be sure.

It was at this moment that Schoudler finally awoke completely from the anaesthetic. His gaze first encountered the flask of serum, followed the tube which ended in his arm, moved to Chellières, who was standing on the right of the bed, then to Lartois, sitting on the left, and came back again to Chellières.

"Well, my dear Baron?" the latter enquired.

"Hullo, you've still got your pretty cap on, eh?" said Schoudler.

Then his eyes turned to indicate Lartois.

"He's the only . . . my only friend," he murmured.

"What about me?" cried Chellières.

"Yes, yes, you too, of course."

Schoudler asked how long he had been asleep, and whether it had been the same operating theatre as the first time. His mind was clearly obsessed by some major question he dared not ask.

His free hand went down below the metal cradle, explored his flank, his groin, the beginning of the thigh and soon met the bandages.

"Well, you seem to have left me a piece of it," he said. "What about lower down?"

"Lower down? Well, it's not there any more," replied Chellières.

"It had to be. I don't like it, you know; I hate myself when I have to amputate. I like surgery which conserves. But when one can't help it . . ."

"Yes, yes, it had to be," repeated Schoudler, as his head sank a little further into the pillows. "But it wasn't worth while. One has to die of something."

Lartois realized that his restless friend was resigned at last; he exchanged a glance with Chellières.

After all, what were they both doing leaning over this amputated wreck of a body, this impaired mind? Schoudler no longer owned anything, neither fortune, house, friends, nor practically even a family; there was no hope for him of any kind, no happiness, not even the shadow of future happiness. So why had he and Chellières been struggling for sixteen days with injections, serums, surgical knives and arterial ligatures?

"Am I even trying to preserve him for my own sake, for the personal pleasure I derive from his presence or his conversation? For the sake of our common memories?"

No, it was not that. In the name of what kind of solidarity had he wished to preserve by sheer effort this semi-corpse which was already at the end of a blind alley? It was a claim that could not be argued, either by the surgeon or himself. They were both men whose lives were concentrated on the will to save men's bodies. It was their destiny and their function; and the honours awarded them for it were not so

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much to recompense them, as to encourage other men to imitate and replace them.

"I've had enough . . . I've had enough . . ." murmured Schoudler, his eyes closed. "My grandson came to see me this morning . . . Yes, I've really had enough."

His voice sounded distant and exhausted. A sudden spasm brought his tongue from his mouth, and then withdrew it once more towards his throat.

Lartois felt a sort of relief; he knew that it was somewhat cowardly, but he had less feeling of being defeated by death when the dying man accepted it or desired it himself.

And there could be no doubt that Schoudler was dying.

His skin was tight across the bones of his face; his eyelids were closed, his breathing harsh, noisy, hindered by his curled-up tongue. And his thumbs had folded themselves into the palms of his hands; while the hands themselves, straight and flat on the sheet, moved like fins.

Professor Chellières put his hand on Professor Lartois's shoulder.

"We knew it," he murmured. "Come along. We must go and have luncheon all the same."

They went downstairs, put on their coats, left the hospital and went to a little restaurant immediately opposite, where Chellières was in the habit of going when he was kept late at work.

"Well, Monsieur le Professeur, a good steak *au poivre*, as usual?" the proprietor asked, as he pushed the table in towards them.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Silence of Mauglaives

THE months following the incident at the cemetery were for both Jacqueline and Gabriel a slow descent into a hell from which neither of them felt they could escape.

Gabriel's jealousy had begun again with an intensity, a continuity and a searching for detail to which it had never previously attained.

Words, names of towns or horses, the sight of people whom Jacqueline had known at the time of her first marriage, or even a reference to such people in conversation, all created in Gabriel either hostile silence or a sudden and absurd fit of anger.

Jacqueline dared not utter a sentence without making sure before hand that it contained no dangerous word. Gabriel was then suspicious

of her silences. "She's thinking of him, she was going to speak of him," he thought. And Jacqueline said anything that came into her head, though it sounded false and had the wrong ring, so as to put a term to the agony of his cold, suspicious watchfulness.

On several occasions they tried to live apart for a few days, to get their second wind as it were, she at Mauglaives and he in Paris, or vice versa. But she realized that, like a wounded man who pulls at his bandages to make the wound bleed, Gabriel took advantage of her absence to ransack her drawers, violate the secrecy of old letters and exhume memories which were hers alone, just to exacerbate his anguish.

The death of Noël Schoudler, which occurred at this time, was the occasion of a quarrel which lasted for a week. Gabriel authorized his wife to attend the funeral mass, but forbade her to go to the cemetery.

"When I think," he told himself, "how much I've done for her, all the trouble I took to save for her what remained of that bad lot's wealth! I might simply have said to hell with it and let the whole thing go to rack and ruin!"

Jacqueline obeyed; she pretended to feel unwell as they came out of the church, and she let the children go to Père Lachaise without her. She did not altogether understand her own docility; but, sometimes rebelling, sometimes doing her best to appease, she was little by little, and by the mere force of the circumstances of their life in common, beginning to submit to Gabriel's psychological attitude. He had succeeded in giving her an intolerable feeling of guilt.

"But what have I done," she groaned when she was alone, putting her hands to her forehead, "what have I done to make him suffer so much? It really isn't possible; he must be mad!"

Gabriel was continually asking himself the same question. There was apparently nothing about him that suggested mental instability. He was reasonably intelligent, he suffered from no mystical or metaphysical anxiety, nor was his body afflicted by any functional disease.

So why, at the slightest word, or even without any reason at all, did his obsession suddenly get the better of him?

At these times Gabriel felt as if his reason were being torn like a piece of cloth, like the seam of a sheet being pulled apart.

And his anger overwhelmed his good sense.

It was at these moments that Gabriel went out and got drunk. Alcohol was the only thing that could dispel this condition or, rather, abolish his consciousness of it.

At the start he drank only with this idea in mind; but soon, as he began to get drunk, he drank simply from a need to drink.

Jacqueline had to take the servants into her confidence to hide the spirits away, to announce that they had forgotten to buy wine or that the key of the cellar had been lost. Childish lies which did not deceive Gabriel.

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Gabriel would then say that he was going out to get cigarettes, or the weekly papers, and would take the opportunity to drink three Pernods, returning, according to circumstances, haggard or morose.

When they were hunting at Mauglaives, Gabriel no longer had to order his wife to follow him. She never left his side by so much as a length. Nevertheless he found means of losing the hunt—or so he pretended—and finishing up in company with Baron van Heeren in some café. The Dutchman had become a terror to Jacqueline.

One evening, when they had failed to kill and hounds had lost as night was falling, twenty kilometres from Mauglaives, Gabriel even succeeded in taking the head huntsman with him.

"Come on, Laverdure," he said. "Jolibois will take hounds home. Come and have a drink; that's an order!"

"Monsieur le Comte could order me to do something less agreeable." Laverdure came home considerably the worse for wear.

"So that's it! So that's what you've been up to! Well, really!" scolded Madame Laverdure, fluttering her eyelids. "You're not going to take it up as a regular thing, I hope? That would be the last straw!"

"Do you know, Léontine," replied Laverdure sententiously, "I think I've discovered what's the matter with the man; he's unhappy because of the memory of Monsieur le Baron François. There!"

"Perhaps! But that's no reason to behave as servants wouldn't," replied Madame Laverdure. "Just look at you! Besides, everyone's talking about it! It's a shame!"

"Yes, yes, I know. But it's perhaps not as simple as all that," replied the huntsman, who worshipped his masters and was devoted to Gabriel.

Drink was making Gabriel look old. He had barely passed forty but his hair was turning very white at the temples, his face was puffy, and there were loose pockets of skin beneath his eyes. The handsome De Voos was spoiling his looks. He was smoking more and more and his fingers were yellow.

Signs of suffering were also marking Jacqueline. She was growing thinner. Her complexion had lost that moving transparency which, till then, had given her a sort of ethereal charm. She was now becoming a withered little woman who had been pretty but was beginning to show wrinkles.

Gabriel began to desire her less often. Indeed, he only wanted her now when he was drunk. To begin with, having learned from a first experience of her own weakness, she decided to refuse him on those days.

"Oh, so that's it," cried De Voos, "tonight Madame is sleeping with her posthumous cuckold. But as for sleeping with me, oh no!"

But then she resigned herself to it. Some force against which she was powerless linked her, welded her, to Gabriel's body. Without this force,

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which dominated her, would she have accepted so much suffering, would she even have had any cause to suffer?

At these times she merely tried to prevent Gabriel's big hands approaching too near her neck. "Perhaps it would be so much better after all . . ." she sometimes thought.

When Gabriel was not drunk, or at the mercy of his obsession, he did crossword puzzles. In his idleness he had developed a passion for the game. That was why he was so fond of the weekly papers. He was to be seen walking through the rooms of Mauglaives with a *Petit Larousse* in his hand. He had come to know the whole of Abraham's family tree by heart and the complete list of the Chaldean and Assyrian kings.

Jacqueline's happiest moments during this period, indeed the only happy ones, were certain evenings when she sewed, while Gabriel, sucking the gold pencil she had given him, murmured: "Let's see, 'His generals disputed his Empire' in nine letters. Oh, that's too easy, it's absurd!"

On these days she thanked God for this miserable, premature happiness of the old. But such moments were rare.

"Really, Gabriel," she cried one day, at the end of her tether; "don't you realize that, by reminding me of him all the time, it's you who prevent my forgetting François? Don't you realize you're doing exactly the opposite of what you should?"

He knew very well that she was right, and that it was not now Jacqueline but he himself who was really responsible for their wretchedness. Nevertheless, rather than admit it, he preferred to think: "For having said that, I shall be unfaithful to you."

His decision was not the result of any new desire, but merely of a will to vengeance; Gabriel had recourse, as is often the case in similar circumstances, to an old mistress, that is to say, to Sylvaine Dual.

Nostalgia for the past and for someone who had done her both good and harm, a feeling of revenge at seeing someone who had abandoned her return, a wish to know whether she still desired this man whom she had considered till then the only real love of her life, all caused Sylvaine to yield without much resistance.

She derived no pleasure from it. She regretted having consented, was astonished that a physical relationship could become so cold after it had been so ardent, and felt the melancholy of destroyed illusions.

As for Gabriel, a strange sort of cowardice prevented his telling Jacqueline of this act which he had committed only so that he might boast of it. Once accomplished, it seemed to him silly, useless and invalid.

And life went on as before, with stag-hunting, rages, drunkenness and crossword puzzles.

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II

On Christmas eve Jacqueline and Gabriel went to Marie-Ange's school to attend the traditional end-of-term concert. Marie-Ange appeared, first to recite a poem by her grandfather, *L'Oiseau sur le Lac*, and then in the choir which sang Franck's *Sixth Beatitude*.

Marie-Ange was now fifteen and a half and taller than her mother. She had that sort of scornful assurance which so often afflicts girls of her age, and which is only a repressed impatience to begin life. Her golden-chestnut hair was parted in the middle and fell on her shoulders in curls; Marie-Ange liked Florentine portraits.

Jacqueline, as she looked at her daughter, noticed none of the features by which Marie-Ange resembled her, but unconsciously sought those, such as her almond eyes, the shape of her mouth, the length of her torso, by which she recalled François.

Gabriel was not in too bad a way that day; he had sobered up from the night before and had not yet started drinking again. The Franck *Beatitude* bored him, but he found the sight of all the little girls, and perhaps above all that of Marie-Ange, agreeable. He felt as if he were plunging into a refreshing and slightly scented bath.

"That's the thing," he thought; "the only way to be happy is to marry a pretty girl of sixteen, keep her permanently in the country, give her children, and go off on the loose a bit oneself."

Jacqueline had feared this afternoon. But to her pleased surprise nothing happened.

That evening she said goodbye to Jean-Noël and Marie-Ange who were going off to winter sports, accompanied by their Aunt Isabelle. Jacqueline preferred to deprive herself of her children during the holidays rather than subject them for a fortnight to their stepfather's scenes.

She would willingly have gone with them to the mountains rather than pay Isabelle's journey: "A rest would do me such a lot of good . . . But God knows what Gabriel would get up to in my absence . . ." And the same reason which made her wish to go compelled her to remain.

She took the opportunity of a moment when Gabriel was not in the room to say quickly to her children, her eyes fixed on the door: "And don't forget to pray for your father, darlings. You may be sure I never forget to do so."

Marie-Ange looked at her mother out of the corners of her eyes with a somewhat contemptuous indifference. She was wondering whether there would be any boys at the mountain chalet; she was sure that very soon now she would be able to show the world how one should live. But how long it was, having to wait twenty-four hours a day! For even her sleep was a waiting.

That same evening Gabriel and Jacqueline left for Mauglaives, taking with them Madame de La Monnerie.

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Since the Curé of Chantou-Mauglaives had to serve several parishes, among which he endeavoured to share his favours, it so happened, this particular year, that the midnight mass did not take place at Mauglaives, and therefore all the Château went to bed early as if it were an ordinary day.

The following day Jacqueline went to preside at the Christmas tree in the free school. Gabriel, having finished the crosswords in both *Gringoire* and *Candide*, went to the kennels and had a talk with Laverdure about arrangements for the next day's hunt. Laverdure would go and "do the wood" over by Chêne-Brûlé, where the keepers told him there were some stags.

"You haven't got a glass of white wine you could give me, Laverdure?" Gabriel said suddenly.

"Of course I have, Monsieur le Comte. Léontine!" the huntsman called. "Go and get us a bottle, you know which kind."

"Oh, Monsieur shouldn't! He's spoiling his health! And I don't mind saying so," said Léontine Laverdure.

"Get along with you and don't talk like that," the huntsman interrupted her. "After all, Monsieur le Comte is doing us an honour . . ."

A little later Gabriel went down to the village. He met the Mayor who invited him to taste his new *marc*.

"It's a bit rough, Monsieur le Comte," said the Mayor, "but it's got body; and it lingers on the tongue; I'm sure a connoisseur like yourself will recognize that."

The Mayor, thinking of the next municipal elections, was delighted that the new châtelain was considered by the village to be a drinker.

At the château the early part of dinner took place without incident. Gabriel found only one opportunity of being disagreeable. As Madame de La Monnerie was talking of a man who had been widowed a few years before, Gabriel, turning to Jacqueline, said: "You should have married him; you could then have married your dead."

Jacqueline, who was picking at a little chestnut purée and felt quite unequal to the turkey, to such an extent had anxiety destroyed her appetite, made no reply.

The big dining-room at Mauglaives was wholly and entirely decorated with stags' heads. There were two or three thousand of them on the walls, the panels of the doors, and even on the beams of the ceiling. The stags had been killed a hundred or more years ago and their heads had faded white. Under the dim glow of the paraffin lamps and the candelabra, in the huge shadows they produced, the forest of frontal bones and spreading horns, which met the eye on every hand, had a look of both the sorcerer's tree and the torture chamber.

The blind man, whose faculties were increasingly declining, appeared, against this background, less a living being than a ghost held together by cobwebs. Madame de La Monnerie, who grew deafer as

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the day drew on, talked for her own benefit, without caring whether anyone listened or answered her.

Florent, as he handed round the dishes, creaked in the depths of his chest like an old windlass.

Never so much as this evening had Jacqueline felt the disquieting, hostile, baneful atmosphere of this room, and the conjunction of those present had never before seemed to her so sinister.

"You used to spend Christmas Eve in Paris in other years, with, well, with my predecessor," Gabriel said suddenly, in that neutral voice Jacqueline had learned to fear.

"Yes, perhaps, sometimes," she replied.

"It should be easy enough to remember, shouldn't it? Can't you answer yes or no?"

"Well, yes, we used to spend Christmas Eve there," she said gently.

"Well, why didn't we stay there and have a party yesterday?"

"Because I didn't think of it; because you didn't suggest it."

"I did suggest it!"

"Then I didn't hear you."

"You're lying again!"

Gabriel lost his temper. His only use was to supervise men of business, huntsmen and hounds! He was shut up in the country! She did not want to take part in any pleasures with him because she had enjoyed them with the other! He was footman to a widow, that was all, footman to a widow!

Jacqueline thought she was going to faint from weakness, exhaustion and despair.

The blind man was searching his plate with a spoon for the little cubes into which his food had been cut; for him the whole universe was contained in the distance which separated the table from his mouth.

Madame de La Monnerie was talking of the Parthenon frieze in the Louvre.

"All right, then!" Jacqueline cried suddenly. "I used to be happy at Christmas, wonderfully happy, as I shall never be again. And all I ask of you is to let me forget that it's Christmas."

Gabriel leapt to his feet, upsetting his chair behind him.

"Very well!" he shouted. "That's fine! That fixes it. It had to break one day, and now it has. It's broken. Not tonight or ever again; I'm leaving for Paris, and I'm going to begin a new life!"

He went to the door, caught his shoulder on a stag's horn, and muttered: "God blast it!" Then he went out.

Jacqueline sat there for a few seconds, her eyes staring into space, then she also got up and went out.

"Where are they going? What's the matter?" the blind man asked.

"It's nothing, my poor Urbain," replied Madame de La Monnerie. "He's a Colonial. A touch of the sun!"

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Jacqueline threw a cape over her shoulders and joined her husband in the courtyard. Gabriel, wearing an overcoat, was getting into his car.

"Do as you like, Gabriel," she said; "I only ask you not to drive like a madman."

She only just had time to move her hand before it was jammed by his slamming the door.

"Don't you worry," he said. "And if I did kill myself, you'd be able to torture a third husband with my memory. That'd be a piece of luck!"

As soon as he got outside the gates, the thought of making a long journey alone through the dark, cold night failed to appeal to him.

He went to Montpréty to try and persuade Gilon to go with him. The Commandant had already gone to bed, wearing thick, striped flannel pyjamas, his spectacles perched on the veins of his nose.

"Oh no, my dear Gabriel!" he replied. "I've been dining out every day for the last month. I've got a bad liver and I've got bad kidneys. You'd do better to go to bed yourself!"

"All right, I understand, you're abandoning me, you're deserting me," said Gabriel. "I'm telling you, I've got to begin a new life."

As he crossed the dining-room on his way out, Gabriel opened the sideboard and, as he stood there, swallowed three glasses of brandy.

From Montpréty to the 1880 "castle" in which van Heeren lived was only some three kilometres.

"What good wind?" cried the huge Dutchman.

He was wearing a befrogged blue velvet smoking-jacket, which made him look like a drum-major of the Empire.

"Van Heeren! You're my only friend, do you know that?" said Gabriel. "Put on a dinner-jacket. We're going to see a bit of life!"

"If life has plump thighs, it's possible I might come with you," replied the Dutchman, his face brick-red as he winked slyly.

The hall of the "castle" smelt of home-made jam; the tapestry on the chairs was also "home made."

Baronne van Heeren appeared in a dressing-gown; she was flat-chested, had thin hair and withered haunches; her cheeks looked as if they had been polished with a chamois leather.

Her face wore that expression of anxiety, guilt and martyrdom which is common to the wives of all drunkards, the expression Jacqueline herself was beginning to wear.

"It's not right, Monsieur De Voos, what you're doing is not right. You're still young. But one day my husband will meet with an accident."

Gabriel's eyes were fixed in such a cynical stare that she took fright and fell silent.

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III

The two Chambers had been in session all Christmas Day so as to pass the Finance Bill before the 31st December. Towards eleven o'clock in the evening the Fine Arts budget had been voted to the Luxembourg without difficulty, after a good speech by Simon Lachaume, who had adjured the Senators to give him the means of defending "this most admirable, most sure and most sacred part of the patrimony of France: her artistic treasures and the vitality of her culture!"

For Simon, who had carefully prepared his budget in the very building in the Rue de Grenelle where he had begun his career by answering Anatole Rousseau's bell, the division was a success. The young Under-Secretary of State—he had succeeded in keeping his portfolio under two successive Governments—as he left the Senate that night wondered what he was going to do. Should he telephone Sylvaine? No. He wanted male companionship to give the nervous excitement of the session a chance of calming down before he went to bed. As he grew older and his political responsibilities increased, Simon found that he needed less and less sleep. In revenge he was eating increasingly more.

"Let's go and have a steak and a bottle of burgundy at the Carnaval," he said to one of his colleagues.

Though he had tried many other establishments, it was always to this place that happiness, hunger, fatigue, success, love or loneliness brought him back. "As if to the stable," he thought.

Not that the place was much better than any other; but Simon had memories there and was used to it. He knew the waiters by their Christian names, he was welcomed with friendly and respectful smiles. The place was growing old with him.

"Good evening, Abel. A quiet corner," said Simon as he entered.

"Of course, as always, straight away, Monsieur le Ministre," said the head waiter.

Simon was not the kind of customer before whom one automatically placed a champagne-bucket; the kitchens were always ready to prepare him any dish he wanted and his bills were always moderate.

From time to time Simon squashed some summons served on the owner, or intervened to reduce his taxes.

That evening he found himself sitting beside an imposing hieratic, silent personage, who sat very straight on the *banquette*, like a giant Bologna sausage or a monstrous phallic emblem which had been deposited there. This personage had a companion, who wore a gold bracelet watch round his wrist, was continually explaining that life was beginning here and now, that the slate must be wiped clean, and that he'd break the first man's jaw who etc . . . And that "if anyone crossed him, cemeteries weren't made for dead dogs."

"It's possible!" replied the other.

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The two men were drinking heavily. Suddenly the one with the gold bracelet got to his feet, came and stood in front of Simon, seized him by the arm, banged his knife and fork into his plate, and cried: "I'm told you're Simon Lachaume? I'm very glad to meet you, I've heard so much about you. You're one of the people who destroyed Schoudler."

He had a dangerous drunken look, and Simon, somewhat perturbed, tried to free himself.

"Let me thank you," the other went on. "You'll understand why straight away, I'm De Voos, the husband of the widow."

Simon was surprised once again.

"She hates you now, you know," Gabriel went on. "You've given her cause enough! You've destroyed the father of her François, the fortune of her François and the newspaper of her François!"

"But, Monsieur, I've never had anything against François Schoudler. I was always on good terms with him," said Simon dryly.

"Oh, so you think he was a good fellow, too, do you?" cried Gabriel.

"Well, in business affairs; I don't know about anything else, Monsieur," Simon added hastily.

Gabriel ran his long hand down his jaw.

"No one," he said, "no one, do you hear me, could have made me suffer more. And anyone who defends him is my enemy."

And, without asking permission, he sat down. He was wearing a tail-coat. Some drunken vanity had caused him to stop in the Rue de Lübeck and change.

As it happened, Simon and De Voos had never met before. In Paris Simon and Jacqueline no longer moved in the same circles. In Berry, though his constituency was close to Mauglaives, Simon's political activities did not include châteaux and masters of hounds. Since the crash there was no longer any reason for him and Jacqueline to renew their relations.

He was rather amused to meet the husband of the young widow whom he had thought, at one moment, he might be able to marry himself.

"How right I was," he said to himself, "or how right destiny was. I should have been in a pretty mess when the crash came."

He was looking at Gabriel.

"He looks exactly the type for her," Simon thought. "A good-looking man, loud-mouthed, probably an idiot and rather hot-tempered. Just right for the country."

He did not in the least understand what Gabriel was saying and thought that, under the influence of alcohol, he was talking of old resentments against Noël Schoudler.

Simon remembered another drunkard who, ten years before, in this very room, had said: "The Schoudlers? Finished, done for! In eight days there'll be a notice up in the Avenue de Messine saying: 'For Sale'."

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And indeed it had happened. Lulu Maublanc, that strange ghost who sometimes materialized on the paths of memory, bowler-hatted, with lumps on his forehead . . .

Simon raised his glass to his lips.

At that moment the lights dimmed, a lime came on in a corner and, after a roll of drums, the leader of the orchestra announced that the management of the Carnaval had great pleasure in presenting in her repertoire, "on her return from a triumphal tour of South America, Anny Féret!"

"Oh, my God! A ghost!" said Simon to his colleague.

The singer, smiling, grown old, looking yellow in the cone of light, came on to the stage. She had grown appallingly stout. Her dress outlined thick rolls of fat between her breast and waist. Simon wondered how much failure, how many disappointed hopes, how many disastrous love-affairs, had made up that "triumphal tour," that Anny Féret should also return here to the stable, to the manger.

She said that she was going to sing, for the benefit of old friends now present (the management had told her that Lachaume was there), songs which had been the great successes of the years 1920-1922, *My Man*, *La Violettera* . . .

Simon felt ridiculously emotional as he listened to these hackneyed songs which had been current at the time of his entry into Paris life. He returned to his old habit of wiping his spectacles with his thumbs. Well, what of it? It wasn't so old, after all. It merely represented the space of time necessary to succeed or fail in his career, to do a job of work or not to do it . . . Life seemed to be reduced to a handful of ashes.

Neither the sight of magic towns, nor old friends suddenly met again, can recall the past with such suddenness and such precision as a banal tune that once was popular. A few notes, a facile rhythm, a poor rhyme or two, acting on some mysterious network of the mind, instantly recall the distant landscapes of our lives, the arms of past mistresses, the faces of the dead.

Anny Féret was now singing the successes of the day or the year, such as *Parlez-moi d'amour*, new tunes which, in ten years' time, would have the same power of stirring the memory. But Simon was not listening to these songs; he would hear them only later.

Simon signed to the waiter to refill the glasses. He did not want to get drunk, of course not; but he was enveloped in an appalling melancholy, like a wet sheet.

For it was the same waiter who, ten years ago, had poured the wine; and it was the same fat gypsy violinist conducting the orchestra and making his violin sob in a "Hungarian Waltz, very special," gazing at the couples with the same pander's glance, with this one difference, that his hair was now quite white; and it was still the same girl who

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looked after the cloakroom and sold the cigarettes; and it was still Anny Féret who was singing . . .

"How can these people," Simon wondered, "put on the same clothes every day, go through the same motions, from adolescence to senile debility, without ever achieving anything else, and without drowning themselves?"

There were the bus-conductors, whom one met again after fifteen years, still on the same route, punching the same tickets at the same hours for the same travellers.

Simon felt a sort of metaphysical distress at the thought of this daily, inexorable repetition of mediocrity.

He emptied his glass. He did not want to drink too much, but, all the same, a little . . .

"And I'm still sitting here drinking just the same . . ."

No! He was not the same. He had refused to teach the same Latin grammar every morning, in the same classroom, and to go home to the same fourth storey in the Rue Lhomond. "Lhomond . . . the *De Viris* . . . it's odd . . ." And have the same meal face to face with Yvonne looking just the same . . .

He had risen, he had *succeeded*, he had changed his job and his women . . . He was among the happy people of the world, because he was worthy of it . . . He had succeeded in getting the Fine Arts budget voted . . . "The artistic patrimony of France . . ."

He was on the verge of judging himself and being disgusted with himself.

He understood why the wind of revolution blows through nations and why sometimes even wars are accepted with joy, because too many men are tired of turning the same millstone, day in day out, and one day their bored hearts burst . . .

But why, since he, Simon, had refused, not only to make the boys repeat the *De Viris* every morning, but, long before that, in his childhood, to lead the same cow to the drinking-trough and take the same manure to the fields, why had he not taken his place among those who rebel, instead of hoisting himself on his own, by his own clever hands, into the best seats at the banquet?

There are certain causes which make one feel like a traitor by the mere fact of not having adopted them. And this feeling can sometimes lace the best drinks with intolerable bitterness.

IV

As soon as Anny Féret had finished her turn, she rushed to Simon's table.

"Oh, Lachaume! What a surprise!" she cried. "How glad I am to see you! But now you've become a famous man; you've got a

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career. I read it all in the papers over there. I hardly dare talk to you."

She dared so little to do so that she was addressing him in the second person singular, which she had never done in the past.

"You'll end up President of the Republic," she added.

Conscience is a tribunal which quickly remits its sentences; and Simon's self-satisfaction was restored by the facile compliments of this fat, night-club singer who fluttered round him, rubbing herself against success, for no reason but the pleasure of acquiring its odour, as one rubs garlic on bread.

"Oh! There's Gaby!" she cried, recognizing De Voos. "All the old friends! But I didn't know you two knew each other!"

"Nor did we till this evening," Simon replied.

"Oh, I see! No one could say that you're getting any younger," she said, turning to De Voos. "It's consoling. You see what's happened to me?" she said gripping the rolls of fat on her sides. "But none of that matters. The important thing is to feel young inside!"

Anny Féret was a simple sort of girl and her talk full of common-places.

Van Heeren suddenly emerged from his own depths; his eyes lit up like two round bulbs in the face of a puppet and, gazing at the singer's expansive bottom, he said: "De Voos, my very dear friend, here's the life, perhaps, that you were talking of!"

"And how's Sylvaine?" Anny asked Gabriel. "Are you still together? No, you don't mean it's over? . . . You've married? Bravo! Happy? . . ."

"What Sylvaine?" Simon asked.

"Sylvaine Dual, you must have known her? Yes, of course you know her!" replied Anny. "There's a girl who knew how to do a bit of climbing! And when I think it was I who put her foot on the rung of the ladder, as you might say, with that poor Lulu. Well, Gaby and she were together a long time. He cost her a lot of money too; he knows how to fleece them. Don't you, my Gaby? . . ."

Simon realized that here before him, in this man wearing a tail-coat, half-collapsed across the table, with his signet-ring, his gold bracelet, his starched cuffs emerging from his sleeves, his greying temples and the bags under his eyes, was the great, tragic, broken love-affair of which Sylvaine sometimes spoke to lend mystery and importance to her own personality.

Simon's expression was so odd that Anny Féret asked him: "I haven't by any chance put my foot in it, have I?"

"No, no," Simon said.

Reassured, Anny Féret went back to Sylvaine.

"And then she's a bit of a Lesbian too," she added. "But I didn't mind that."

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"Yes. Why shouldn't she be Lesbian *too*," thought Simon. "A little more or a little less, man or woman, what difference does it make?"

But Simon could not prevent a surge, inexplicable in him, of disgust . . .

Sylvaine with Simon, Anny with Sylvaine, Sylvaine with Maublanç, Marthe with Wilner, Stenn with Marthe, Marthe with Simon, and Simon with Stenn in the same Government . . . Simon with Madame Éterlin, Madame Éterlin with Jean de La Monnerie, Jacqueline de La Monnerie with De Voos, De Voos with Sylvaine, Sylvaine with Wilner, Simon with Sylvaine . . . Suddenly that ballad of those hanged by sex began running through his head. The macabre dance of love going round and round, the generations mingling one with another and the dead mixing with the living! Not only the stable, the manger and the grindstone, but the riding school, the ox harnessed to the wheel and trampling its own manure . . .

And the constant heaping of this ordure was accompanied by the languorous sobbings of the same violin. And Simon had always before his eyes, whether it was Neudeker ten years ago, or De Voos today, a military hero rotted with drugs or alcohol to symbolize the decadence of force.

Simon, who had amused himself for ten years watching this constant interchange of couples, who had held his place in the game as he might have sat at the big table in a casino, and with a similar vanity, was now suddenly assailed with horror and disgust. Why? What was it all about?

"I ought really to have stayed with Sylvaine," De Voos was saying to Anny Féret. "She was a wonderful girl. I left her rather brutally. Well, you see, a fortnight ago I had the *cafard* and I slept with her again, just one night, like that; it did me good."

Simon felt as though a hot iron was piercing his skin. It was not only painful; it was disquieting, because everything had changed, the temperature of his limbs, the feel of his blood, the rhythm of his thought. He wanted to knock this drunken cretin off his chair, and only his sense of being a public personality restrained him.

"A fortnight ago . . ." That meant during a week in which Simon had seen Sylvaine three or four times. Wasn't that enough for her?

"But what's the matter with me?" Simon wondered. "I don't care a damn about the girl. We see each other when we both want to. We owe each other nothing. She's perfectly free to do what she likes on the nights I'm not with her. I must be mad!"

He asked impatiently for the bill, paid it, scarcely said goodbye to Anny Féret and left.

"I'm sure I must have put my foot in it," said the singer when he had left the room.

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Simon dropped his colleague at the end of a street—"You're quite close here, aren't you?"—and went to the Rue de Naples.

"It would be very funny," he thought laughing, "if that cretin also came to see her tonight."

The hot iron was still burning his chest and the small of his back, and the sensation was beginning to be unbearable.

Sylvaine, who was already in bed and alone, came to open the door; she was sleepy and surprised, but on the whole fairly pleased.

Without saying a single word Simon smacked her face twice, right and left, backwards and forwards.

And the hot iron began to cool down and withdraw from beneath his skin.

It was thus that Simon and Sylvaine discovered they were in love.

V

The Carnaval was empty. The orchestra was playing only for van Heeren, who was asleep, and for Gabriel, who had gone to another table, asked for a sheet of paper, and was writing.

Anny Féret had gone. The violinist looked at the head waiter, the head waiter looked at the waiters; the bill had been placed first in front of the Dutchman and then in front of Gabriel. The latter absent-mindedly put it in his pocket and signalled the waiter to bring him another drink.

He knew he was drunk. But he felt wonderfully lucid in the middle of a confused and swinging universe; he was like a centre of light surrounded by vague forms who were absurdly gyrating. He had just discovered what the world was like at last. He felt not only lucid but prodigiously intelligent.

"Since I'm taking up a definite position, she must know why," he said to himself.

And at the top of the sheet of paper they had brought him, he wrote:

"Since I'm taking up a definite position, you must know why . . ."

Then the sentences came of their own accord, with a precision, an aptness of phrase, which surprised Gabriel.

"Since you're not going to see me again, you must know why. For two and a half years you have made me suffer as a man should not be made to suffer. No one ought to persist in making anyone suffer as you have made me suffer . . ."

This seemed to Gabriel at once sad and brilliant; the only confusing thing was that the lines on the paper all seemed to join each other at the ends. But that was all right, parallel lines did join each other in infinity.

"You have never stopped talking to your dead husband. But has he

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ever answered you? Ha! ha! He's never answered you because there isn't anything on the other side. When you discover that, it will be your punishment. There's nothing on the other side, nothing!"

He was interrupted by the arrival of a group of revellers, wearing paper hats and blowing wooden trumpets.

Their entry had the atmosphere of a fag-end about it, a ridiculous effort to prolong the amusement of yesterday and use up the remaining accessories.

Swaying on their tired legs, holding each other up by the arms, shouting so as not to fall asleep, their faces marked with the signs of indigestion, these people were the wreckage of the Parisian Christmas Eve which Gabriel had made an excuse for his anger.

The exhausted musicians feigned animation and joyousness, and the champagne-corks popped under the dextrous fingers of the waiters.

"Vengeance," Gabriel went on writing, "and you deserve the misfortunes which have come to you and will continue to come."

He was not astonished, when he raised his eyes, to see van Heeren looking absurd in a frilly paper cap, nor to be crowned a moment later himself with a clown's hat.

Multi-coloured streamers, flying across the room, wrapped themselves round his neck, his cuffs, his pen, and little rubber balls bounced off his temples.

A prostitute, whom the rowdy party had picked up somewhere on their way, in some less high-class establishment than the Carnival, came up to Gabriel and, leaning over the table, said, with that ironical, provocative, and almost aggressive voice these women so often assume: "Who are you writing to? This isn't the time for writing! Is it a love-letter?"

Gabriel raised his eyes to her without seeing her, without noticing that she was pale, had very smooth black hair, and that she might almost have been pretty but for the fact that her eyes were too close together and her jaw too large.

"Well, you're not very talkative, I must say! I shan't bite you, you know!" she added.

And she went off towards the cloakroom.

Still entangled in paper streamers, Gabriel returned to his letter.

"You have never begun to understand the kind of man I am, and since you have understood nothing about me, you naturally will not be able to understand this letter any better . . ."

Then Gabriel put down his pen, picked up the sheet of paper, and with perfect logic tore it into eight pieces.

It was at this moment that the rowdy party, pushing its gaiety in front of it like a wheelbarrow, retreated from the Carnival and went to spread its crackers and confetti elsewhere.

The prostitute, coming out of the cloakroom a few seconds later,

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cried: "Oh, the bastards! They've carted me properly!" She went and sat down by Gabriel.

"So you've finished your letter, have you?" she asked. "Are you worried? Well, you mustn't think about it. You must be gay. We'll go and find my friends, shall we? I think I know where they've gone."

She removed Gabriel's clown's hat, put it on her own head, turned to look in a mirror and said: "How does it suit me?" She then tried to get Gabriel to his feet by pulling at his arm.

"Come on, let's go, it's boring here!"

"All right," said Gabriel, getting up. "But I must go and explain things to her; explain them to her myself. And then we shall see afterwards . . ." he added with a wide, vague gesture.

They brought him his coat. He put a hundred-franc note in the waiter's hand.

"What about the bill?" asked the bowing head waiter, holding out a new one.

Gabriel made another wide, vague gesture towards the Dutch Baron.

The musicians were hurriedly putting their instruments away in their cases, and the waiters were collecting the streamers and the pieces of the letter into a basket.

Van Heeren, suddenly realizing that he was being abandoned, cried: "My very dear friend!"

Then he collapsed massively on to the *banquette*, this time to sleep soundly.

Gabriel went out, the prostitute clinging to him, or rather to his overcoat, to the elegant, warm garment.

She was half-drunk herself; the shame of loneliness and the automatic hope of making money made her cling like a leech to this man who said not a word to her.

They got into the car, banged the doors shut, and Gabriel collapsed over the steering-wheel, his head in his hands.

"What's the matter with me? What's the matter with me?" he groaned.

He was completely bewildered by the hate and despair which alternated within him.

The prostitute put her arm round his neck.

"Come on, don't be sad; you'll see how I'll console you, darling; you'll see," she whispered.

And she put her tongue into Gabriel's ear as if the better to make him hear her.

Gabriel was now concentrated on trying to recall the phrases of his letter, and in particular that brilliant, irrefutable passage which resolved everything.

"Did you take my letter?" he angrily asked the prostitute.

"No, honey, you tore it up yourself!"

"It's not true!"

"But yes, I promise you you did!"

"Perhaps I did!" Gabriel said.

He started the car moving slowly.

The prostitute was stroking the beaver lining of his overcoat.

"Really," she murmured, "it's too sad putting such lovely fur inside. You know, what I liked about you at once," she added, "was that you were wearing tails. Tails always look very distinguished. Where are we going, darling?"

De Voos was driving towards the Porte d'Italie.

"Do you live this way?" she asked again.

Suddenly he stopped the car in the middle of the street, took the prostitute by the shoulders, trying, in spite of the fact that they were both drunk, to hold her too-narrow eyes with his, and shouted: "What do you think's on the other side?"

"What do you mean the other side?"

"When you're dead!"

The prostitute nodded her head and replied: "So that's what's worrying you! My God, you must be drunk! Don't worry, there isn't anything. Everything they tell us is all lies. There's nothing at all. I'm sure of it! That's what's so disgusting!"

"Of course! You're sure of it too!" cried Gabriel with a triumphant laugh.

He drove on again, pressing down the accelerator as far as it would go.

"Now I know what I've got to do," Gabriel murmured.

"Really! I don't know what you've got to do, but that's no reason for killing us. Come on, slow down."

She stroked his hand, his neck, his thigh, trying to calm him down. But Gabriel heard nothing, felt nothing.

"I shall win at last, I shall prove it to her . . ." he kept on repeating to himself. And the lights, the pavements, the houses, flowed before him, like patches of sunlight and shadow on the waters of a lake each side of a motor launch. The car had passed the gates of Paris.

"If you don't stop at once, I'll scream for help, I'll scream for the police," cried the prostitute.

The wheels were bumping over the cobbles of Villejuif and the speedometer, dimly lit by the dashboard-light, was registering well over sixty.

The woman, becoming more panic-stricken every moment, wondered whether this mad drunkard was driving her towards a crash in the middle of the night, or towards some savage rape followed by strangulation. She began to scream, stridently, continuously, inhumanly.

Gabriel seemed to notice her existence.

"What? Do you want to get out?" he said.

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He slowed down, without coming completely to a halt, leaned over to open the door, and pushed her out.

She staggered a few yards, tripped over the pavement, and clung to a tree; leaning against the bark, she felt her heart missing a beat and sweat on her temples.

The rear light of the car had already disappeared.

VI

Diane's Chamber, so called because Diane de Poitiers had, so it was said, slept in it and the tapestries of hunting scenes on the walls been specially made for her, was on the first floor of the famous façade. Two tall windows, reaching down to the chequer-patterned parquet, opened on to a balcony from which could be seen, by day, the court of honour, the green lake and the greater part of the park.

The room, with its coffered ceiling, its swarming blue-and-gold figures on the tapestries, the flights of birds, the prancing horses and stags, the wild boars, the panthers, the negroes, the goddesses, its bed with slender pillars, its Florentine writing-desk and its two large Louis XIV chairs covered in red damask, was princely and almost fairy-like, yet retained human proportions.

Jacqueline had always occupied it since the time of her first marriage.

At this hour only one of the pillars of the bed, a corner of tapestry and one damask chair were visible by the light of a short candle which was sinking into its molten wax on the bedside table.

Her eyes open, her hair spread over the pillow, Jacqueline was thinking: "We shall have to put electricity into Mauglaives. At least partially. But as long as my poor uncle's alive it's not possible; he wouldn't understand. Besides, there are so many repairs to be done. Even in this room the balustrade of the balcony's giving way, the parquet's warped . . . Once one begins . . ."

She had spent a sleepless night, slipping from time to time into a sort of physical half-sleep without her consciousness or her thoughts being for one second dulled. She had a feeling as if the top of her skull was being raised like a helmet, and that she could see beneath the workings of her mental machinery. The mild sleeping-pill she had taken had been no use, except to enfeeble her resistance to her obsession.

"He'll come back, of course he will, he can't not come back. He'll come back tomorrow . . . I'd really have done better to go to the mountains . . . Oh, I do hope nothing's happened to him! Anyway he's got his lucky charm . . . Heavens, if I begin believing in things like that!"

She thought about the first weeks after they had met . . . "If I could have imagined what was going to happen." She remembered that Friday when Gabriel and she, side by side, had waited at the edge of a

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wood while hounds checked. Gabriel had said, almost as if it were a joke, though his voice had trembled a little: "When are we going to get married, Jacqueline?"

"In six weeks if you like, Gabriel; it'll be the end of the hunting season."

And Jacqueline had felt that she was going to fall off her horse.

The wax overflowed the socket and slid down the long silver candlestick like a little river of pearls.

Jacqueline tried to remember what her engagement to François had been like, and discovered with a sort of sad surprise that her memories of it were no longer immediate or precise. She had to search the past to find the bones of her first love. Time, the universal master, had devoured even that. Jacqueline considered doing daily exercises of memory so as to preserve her moments of happiness from those inexorable jaws.

"You see, François, you see," she murmured to herself, "in reality I love him perhaps as much as I loved you, perhaps even more, since I love him without being happy... And perhaps you'll bear me a grudge for it, and he can't understand. Why can't he understand? What can I do? We are all of us sick..."

There was the sound of a car, which grew louder in the night; tyres crunching on the gravel... Jacqueline held her breath to make sure that these were no fantasies born of waiting, but real sounds. Tears came to her eyes: Gabriel had come home. Her anxiety dissolved, leaving her in physical pain, as if broken on the wheel. No long hunt on horseback required as much strength as a night like this. Gabriel had come home; but what condition was he in?

What did it matter now? For in spite of everything she had no other desire, no other need, to calm her pain than to hold his head to her breast, even if he were drunk.

Gabriel got out of the car, took a heavy, hairy object from the rear-view mirror and put it in his coat-pocket, banged the door, and forgot to turn off the headlights.

Then, with violent but uncertain gait, he went towards the door of the château in the old façade.

He did not see Laverdure, who was coming from the kennels with a hound on a leash.

The winter night was still dark; it would begin to grow a little lighter in half an hour's time, but it was time for Laverdure to be at work.

The second huntsman, who was to do the further woods that morning, had already set out some time ago.

Everyone was asleep in the château and the outbuildings. Only the grumbling of the hounds could be heard; they had been awakened by the taking of the tufters.

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Laverdure could see, by the diffused beam of the headlights reflected from the coach-houses, Gabriel's tall silhouette opening the door of the château. The huntsman felt sorry, as he always did, when he saw Gabriel come home drunk.

He went to the car and turned out the lights.

"It's cold this morning," he thought. "Mustn't let the water freeze in the radiator."

He opened the bonnet, turned on the radiator-tap, and listened a moment to the water flowing. "It's not wise," he thought, "to leave the château doors open like that at night. It might get known and tempt prowlers. But there's no help for it, because Monsieur le Comte comes home at any hour. Perhaps he's sick too. One day he'll fall downstairs. I ought to see him to his room . . ."

He went towards the château door which hung wide open. At that moment the hound uttered a long, sinister howl.

"Quiet, Cigarette," said Laverdure, smacking the hound across the muzzle.

He tied the hound to a big iron scraper.

Gabriel had some difficulty in lighting one of the candles on the big console-table in the hall; he had forgotten to shut the door, and a draught was flowing round him, twisting about his arm and the candle-wick. At last he succeeded in getting a little yellow flame, which lit up, as he went upstairs, the bottoms of the portraits of the Marshals of Mauglaives, their pink hands, cracked and varnished, resting imperiously on a gun-carriage or the map of Flanders.

At the bend on the first landing Gabriel was treacherously seized by the wrist, and let the candle fall. He had caught his sleeve in one of the brass rings which supported the red-velveted banister-rail.

He felt his way upwards. He vaguely heard footsteps echoing his on the flight below. But Gabriel was in such a state that even if his own shadow had made the stairs creak behind him, he would not have turned round.

Within the pocket of his overcoat, his hand stroked a heavy, flexible object, which ended in a round polished lump like a hard stone; Gabriel grasped the weapon in the palm of his hand.

There was a diffused glow from the bottom of the stairs, as if one of the pink hands of the Marshals had picked up the candle. When Gabriel turned into the passage on the first floor, the glow disappeared. But Gabriel saw at the end of the huge shadowy space, a thin, yellow line marking the bottom of a door. It was precisely there that he was going.

Jacqueline heard the footsteps drawing nearer, and then a hand rustling like an animal over the door in search of the bronze handle.

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Then the door opened, catching a little, as it always did, on an unevenness in the parquet.

Jacqueline saw Gabriel come towards her, his tall shoulders covered with beaver, his shirt front crumpled, his white tie hanging down below his collar. She saw his face draw near.

She sat up, put her little naked feet on the parquet, and retreated as far as she could against the pillar of the bed, seeking some way of escape, not because Gabriel was drunk, but because his drunkenness, during the journey through the night, had become transformed into a fixed mask of demoniacal and demented joy.

She tried to cry: "Gabriel!"; but unfortunately uttered the word: "François!"

Quickly, putting her hands out in front of her, she tried to scream, to warn Gabriel, to bring him back to the level of human understanding.

But the stag's slot crashed down on the top of her temple, the scream was strangled between her throat and teeth, and Jacqueline's head banged against the oak pillar.

Laverdure, lighting himself with his old wartime lighter made from a little shell, was making his way along the passage on the first floor.

"There, he's gone into Madame la Comtesse's room, and at this time of night too," he thought. "So there's no need for me . . ."

He heard a strangled cry, but, though it was immediately cut short, it was laden with such horror that Laverdure went on.

"What a liberty I'm taking! What a liberty I'm taking!" he thought. "Perhaps they're in bed together after all. What shall I look like?"

He automatically took off his cap and put it in the pocket of his old coat.

The door of Diane's Chamber was ajar.

Laverdure saw "Monsieur le Comte" supporting with one hand, by the collar of her nightdress, "Madame la Comtesse's" inert and sagging body, and hitting her on the head. Under the horn life-preserver the skull made a dull cracking sound.

Gabriel showed no surprise when he saw Laverdure come in, and did not resist being led away from the corpse.

The huntsman felt Jacqueline's breast beneath his fingers and, as if it were a forbidden thing, removed his hand.

"Monsieur le Comte will go to prison," thought Laverdure for a moment. "The police . . . The newspapers . . . And what about Monsieur le Marquis and the children?"

With the huntsman's quick reflexes, he glanced round the room with his flint-coloured eyes.

There was no disorder, not a trace of a struggle; a normally slept-in bed.

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Gabriel, dazed, his fingers relaxed, had let the weapon fall to the ground.

"Luckily horn hits without cutting," thought Laverdure. "If he'd used the candlestick there would have been blood everywhere."

There were merely two little brown trickles, which had already stopped flowing, shining at Jacqueline's right ear and nostril.

The blows had landed on her thick hair and fractured the skull without cutting the scalp.

Laverdure picked up the body and, carrying it in front of him, went to one of the French windows, opened it, passed with his burden out on to the balcony which, from an elevation of some twenty feet, gave on to the silence of the frosty night.

He took time to think out clearly what he was doing, as he placed Jacqueline's stomach against the carved stone balustrade which had been threatening to collapse for a long time past. Then, retreating a pace, he put his foot against the balustrade and pushed with all his strength, sending the stones and the body cascading into the night.

Then he left the balcony, closed the French window, and went over and picked up the stag's slot.

"What I've just done's rather clever! Pretty cunning!" he thought, looking at the French window which he hastily went and re-opened.

"Come on, Monsieur le Comte, we must act quickly now," he said in a curt, low voice, taking Gabriel by the arm.

They went out without touching anything else in the room. In the draught from the window the wick of the candle guttered in its wax.

The two men went into Gabriel's room which was next door. They lit another candle. Gabriel allowed himself to be completely taken in hand; he allowed Laverdure to undress him.

Only for one moment did Gabriel seem to come out of his daze.

And then it was to say: "She couldn't answer me. I ought to have thought of that. I shall never know either."

His face turned green and Laverdure smacked it, not angrily, but with little rapid blows, to prevent his being sick.

Laverdure scattered over the bed and across the floor—with the negligence he imagined proper to a rich, drunken man—the overcoat, the tail-coat, the shirt, the white waistcoat and the patent-leather shoes.

He hurriedly searched in the cupboard and chest-of-drawers, made Gabriel put on riding-breeches, a thick high-necked sweater, and pushed his legs into Newmarket boots.

"Is Monsieur's yellow overcoat in the cloakroom?"

Gabriel nodded his head.

"Come on, we mustn't lose time," Laverdure said. They went back into the passage. The darkness was not so intense and Laverdure feared a door might open. "If anyone were to see us, I should be an accomplice. What could I say? Why have I done this? . . ." There was very

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little chance that the fall of the stones and the body had been heard. The Marquis's room was at the other end of the château. Florent and his wife lived in a sort of half-basement underneath their old master, so that they might be on hand to go to him if he needed them. The other servants were either in the low rooms in the attics or in the outhouses, and they would not be getting up yet.

Only Madame de La Monnerie lived in this part of the château. But she was so deaf . . . Yet, when the two men were starting down the stairs, Laverdure heard a voice say, from behind the thicknesses of panelling and tapestries: "What's the matter? Come in!"

In the cloakroom Laverdure helped Gabriel on with his yellow coat, put on his gloves and handed him a soft hat, then pushed him out of doors, closed the front door, and loosed Cigarette, who was shivering.

"It's damned lucky she didn't start howling," Laverdure thought.

He went and hung the stag's slot in the car in its usual place, having first carefully wiped it on his coat.

He led Gabriel round the château walls so as not to cross the whole of the court of honour, and to reach the park by a side path.

The huge façade was beginning to stand out among the grey shadows, but it was still impossible to distinguish anything at ground level.

"Supposing I've left some stupid thing undone, like that window, something I ought to have thought of?" Laverdure said to himself. "In the first place, there'll be the marks of our feet on the parquet, both Monsieur le Comte's and mine. And then they'll want to know how Madame la Comtesse came to fall . . . Anyway, I can't go back on it now. But why did I do it?"

Cigarette was already beginning to strain at the leash.

VII

The frightful coldness of his feet, due to the fact that Laverdure, when he had put his boots on for him, had left him with his thin silk socks, brought Gabriel back to a sense of reality.

He was in a forest ride at dawn. He was walking quickly, without very well knowing why, yet in spite of the speed he was shivering. Laverdure, with the hound pulling at the leash, was walking a few paces ahead, talking to the hound in a low voice.

Cigarette went along with her nose to the ground. Then she suddenly raised her muzzle to a bush, hesitated, sought to detect on the cold air something that was perceptible only to her, and started off again.

Suddenly, without hesitation this time, Cigarette bounded forward, nearly pulling the leash out of the huntsman's hand, climbed the low bank and tried, growling, to enter the wood.

"She's got wind of him all right," said Laverdure, holding the hound.

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"Yes, he's here all right. This stag doesn't leave the enclosure. All the same, it's a pity that such a good stag, to judge from his slot, can't be hunted," he added, looking rancorously at Gabriel.

For a few moments he was silent, then he shook his head and said in a low voice: "Just to think that we shall never see Madame la Comtesse on a horse again . . ."

Gabriel, with a sudden spasm in his lower ribs, had bent double as if he were about to vomit. But he only retched, and the cold air about him smelt of champagne.

"Is Monsieur feeling a little better? Does Monsieur know what he must say?" Laverdure asked.

Gabriel straightened up, took a deep breath, glanced about him and then looked back again at Laverdure.

"Yes, yes, I think so," he said.

"Good, but Monsieur must listen to me very carefully," the huntsman went on, fixing Gabriel with his hard, grey eyes.

"Monsieur returned from Paris, I imagine, at precisely a quarter to six. Monsieur was gay, he had spent the night at a party, but that's nothing to do with me. Monsieur returned in his car, just as I was leaving for the wood with Cigarette. Monsieur le Comte said to me: 'Ah, there you are, Laverdure, wait for me, I'll come to the wood with you.' I replied: 'That's just like Monsieur le Comte; never tired. There's nothing I should like better; it's always a pleasure for a huntsman to have the Master go with him.' Quiet, Cigarette! Quiet!"

The two men were standing face to face, Gabriel, tall, wearing his soft hat, bending his head a little, and Laverdure, stocky, his head raised and his arm shaken by the hound's impatience.

"I beg Monsieur's pardon, but I think he would do well to wipe his ear. It would not create a very good impression, particularly today."

Gabriel found a handkerchief in the pocket of his overcoat and, wiping off the prostitute's lipstick, contemplated the handkerchief. "Where did that woman get to?" he wondered. He suddenly saw the open door of the car and her tottering figure. He hadn't killed her too by any chance? He could remember nothing except that her eyes were too close together, rather as if he had seen them in a dream, and yet, the handkerchief . . .

"Then," Laverdure went on, "Monsieur told me to empty the car's radiator while he went and changed. Monsieur did not wish to awaken Madame la Comtesse; of course I don't know, but I imagine that *Monsieur did not go and wake Madame la Comtesse*," Laverdure repeated more loudly and with increasing emphasis, till Gabriel gave a sign of assent. "Monsieur changed quickly; he came down again almost at once, and then we left by the back of the château. That's all; there's nothing else. If Monsieur should be asked to try to remember if he heard any sound behind him as he was walking across the

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park, Monsieur might be able to recollect that he said to me: 'Hullo, what on earth's that noise, Laverdure?' And that I replied: 'It must be a dead branch falling into the lake...' But only if Monsieur is asked. And then we went to Chêne-Brûlé, where it was agreed yesterday with Monsieur that I should go, since I had been informed that there were deer there. We began having a look, and harboured a stag with a herd in the big enclosure."

Laverdure crouched down, pushing aside a couple of twigs, and plunging his forefinger into a hole the size of a half-crown, a few inches deep, in the cold carpet of the dead leaves.

"The stag's a fourth-year head, there's no doubt of it," he said. "And a good slot. Monsieur le Comte can see for himself. And here are the slots of the hinds. The odd thing is, there have been other beasts on the same track. That big triangular slot there; Monsieur can see it clearly with the two heels marked behind." (And Laverdure began brushing aside the leaves.) "Well, it must be a three-year-old boar, and the slot's last night's too; it's quite fresh. But look, Cigarette won't have anything to do with that line. You can see she's a daughter of Valençay's."

Overriding all else was his instinct for hunting and his liking for work well done; and the huntsman went on talking, making use, in their original sense, of expressions which have been incorporated into the language for so many centuries that their origin is almost forgotten: follow a line, first in the field, cast about, change horses, in at the death...

"It won't matter disturbing them today," he went on, "and I'd like to have a look at that stag."

He went in to the undergrowth, advancing carefully along wide zigzags behind the hound; and Gabriel followed them, his face whipped from time to time by a thin, bare twig.

"Shush!" said Laverdure to Gabriel, whose cold feet were carelessly rustling the leaves.

Suddenly Laverdure crouched down, gathered Cigarette to him, saying: "Quiet, now, quiet!" and whispered: "Does Monsieur le Comte see them? There?"

And he pointed to where, a little distance away, between the young trees, a stag and three hinds stood tawny in the morning light against the thin pallor of the birches. The deer lowered their heads, raised them again, their mouths holding a leaf or a few blades of grass which they chewed with a disdainful air, moving a few steps forward on their graceful legs, seeming to drive before their delicate, mobile nostrils a milky cloud of breath. One of the hinds was much smaller than the others.

Gabriel took his head in his hands.

"But what's happened, Laverdure? What have I done?" he cried.

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At the sound of his voice the hinds started, and in their beautiful eyes, the great eyes of blind princesses, appeared a sudden gleam of panic; the stag turned his head and quivering nostrils towards the men; then the herd moved away at a slow, dignified trot, the hinds huddling together, the stag bringing up the rear.

"Monsieur must not think of it any more. Monsieur must forget everything, as if it had not happened," said Laverdure; "and remember only what I told him . . . Now we can go home. It's the normal hour . . ."

Gabriel had the feeling that his thought was moving on several levels at the same time.

"As if it had not happened . . ." There was one level of Gabriel's thought in which, indeed, the disordered memories of this frightful night were no different from nightmare, or the visionary imaginings of drunkenness. At any moment someone would shake him by the arm, crying: "Come on, wake up!" and nothing would have altered; and Gabriel would continue to be jealous of François and to torture Jacqueline.

But on another level there were fragments of certain knowledge; there was the lipstick on his handkerchief, proving the existence of the prostitute; there were slender pieces of evidence which thrust his memories into the domain of the real, the accomplished, the irremediable. Gabriel remembered a letter; did he merely imagine he had written it, or had he written it? As long as nobody found it!

And finally there was another level on which Gabriel was preparing to pretend stupefaction and despair, to reply to the questions of the police; even to be arrested for murder.

"What did you do with the slot?" Gabriel asked hoarsely.

"I put it back in its place in the car, Monsieur le Comte."

"Very good," replied Gabriel, as if the huntsman had merely performed one of the duties for which he was employed.

Then Gabriel realized that this man, this servant, was trying to save his honour and his life.

"Thank you, Laverdure," he said in a low voice.

"Oh, Monsieur's got nothing to thank me for. I did it; but I couldn't really say why. Besides, it's not certain it'll succeed."

As they emerged from the undergrowth the huntsman, conscientious from habit, broke a branch at the edge of the ride to mark the stag's track.

VIII

Gabriel and Laverdure were on their way back to Mauglaives when Charlemagne, the kennelman, came running breathlessly to meet them.

"Monsieur le Comte, Monsieur le Comte," he cried, "there's been a terrible accident!"

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"What's happened?" Gabriel asked.

"Madame la Comtesse . . ."

"Well, what about Madame la Comtesse?"

"She's fallen from the balcony. She's . . . She's dead . . ."

Gabriel uttered a loud cry, which Laverdure heard with satisfaction. "Yes, it's all right," thought the huntsman. "That man won't give himself away easily."

Gabriel set off at a run, then, after some hundred yards, slowed down to a quick walk. As they went, Charlemagne repeated three times the little he knew.

"Then we thought that Monsieur le Comte must have gone to the wood with Laverdure, as he sometimes does," he concluded; "and I was sent to tell him. But Monsieur was further away than we thought."

In front of the château there was a sort of hushed and terrified excitement; a group of servants and peasants was standing under the balcony, looking alternately at the fallen stones and the gap in the façade above.

"It looks solid enough," someone whispered, "but these buildings are all old and rotten, and then one day this is what happens . . ."

"Who found her?"

"Florent, it seems. In her nightdress she was."

"Poor woman!"

"Go on, move off," said Laverdure, dispersing the group. "What do you think you're doing behaving like this when the masters have had a misfortune?"

Then he turned over the fallen stones to see if by any chance his boot had marked them.

Gabriel had disappeared into the château.

Jacqueline's body was in the hands of Madame Florent and Madame Laverdure. The two women, their eyes dimmed with tears, had already, with the experience and despatch of peasant-women, begun laying out the body and transforming the room into a mortuary chapel.

"Madame la Comtesse went to communion yesterday for Christmas," whispered Madame Laverdure sniffing, "so she can't have had many sins to take with her to heaven."

There had been so much going to and fro in the room, between the door and the bed and the balcony, that it was impossible to recognize any individual footprints on the parquet.

It was not face to face with the body, but face to face with old Madame de La Monnerie that Gabriel had most difficulty in assuming the right attitude. He adopted the solution of holding his head in his hands and weeping. As his nervous system was utterly exhausted, he found no difficulty in doing this, and it even did him good.

"When I think . . . when I think that I made her so unhappy . . ." he sobbed, and then hurriedly took refuge in his room.

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Madame de La Monnerie had watched him dry-eyed; her face was already so ravaged by age and loneliness that sorrow could damage it no further.

Laverdure went to see the Marquis. The latter had had the news broken to him with useless precautions.

"Oh, the poor child!" the Marquis had merely remarked.

When Laverdure arrived, he found him arguing with Florent.

"But Monsieur le Marquis can't put on his yellow coat today!" the latter was saying. "Monsieur le Marquis is in mourning."

"Very well then, dress me in black!" cried the blind man. "Well, Laverdure, what have you got to report?"

"Monsieur le Marquis, I've got a stag with a good head in an enclosure where there's also a three-year-old boar . . . But with the death of Monsieur's niece . . . Naturally . . ."

The blind man was silent for a moment.

"What's that? We can hunt the three-year-old. Why, a boar's a black animal!" he cried. "No one can be shocked! Go and hunt your beast, Laverdure, even if there are no masters out, it doesn't matter. The hounds must hunt, and you'll come and tell me about it this evening."

As Laverdure was leaving the Marquis, he was told that Madame de la Monnerie wished to see him.

The old lady, a black ribbon supporting her sagging neck, said: "Laverdure, did my son-in-law kill my daughter?"

"Really, Madame la Comtesse . . ."

"Come on, come on, don't tell me lies, my friend! A woman does not go out on to a balcony in her nightdress in the middle of winter. She puts on a dressing-gown. He came home drunk, didn't he? You're the only person who knows. So if you refuse to answer me . . . I heard a noise, you see, this morning, yes I did! You're surprised? Well, I'm going to ask for a police enquiry. And then we'll know whether it was my son-in-law or someone else, or no one at all."

"Well, Madame la Comtesse . . ."

"Speak up!"

Then, for the first time, Laverdure lost patience.

"I may have private things to say to Madame la Comtesse," he cried. "But Madame la Comtesse, though she can hear at night, does not with all respect hear so well in the daytime, so I might as well order the town drum and go and shout in the market place."

"Yes, very well," said Madame de La Monnerie, vexed. "All right, I'll listen to you wherever you like."

"If it would not be too much trouble for Madame to come to the kennels, whenever she likes, as if she wished to see her daughter's favourite hounds," said Laverdure, respectful and courteous once more.

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Madame de La Monnerie therefore went to the kennels a little later. Laverdure took the old lady into the runs and threw the hounds a few pieces of knacker's meat to make them growl and fight.

"Oh, it stinks," said Madame de La Monnerie.

"Yes, it does!" said Laverdure making an apologetic gesture.

And there, amid the hubbub made by sixty hounds—the old lady, moreover, heard better amid noise—Laverdure recounted what he knew, without much emphasizing the criminal act and without even mentioning the stag's slot.

"It was the sort of blow one gives in an argument, when one's drunk," he explained. "He most certainly did not want to kill her. Indeed, it was a piece of bad luck that the pillar of the bed should have been just there. . ."

At the same time he was shouting "Back there!" to the big brindled dog-hounds and driving them back with his whip, that they might not make water on Madame de La Monnerie's stockings.

"Now Madame la Comtesse knows everything. . ." he concluded. "She has only to decide. I did what I did on the spur of the moment, I don't really know why; perhaps to avoid a scandal at Mauglaives and also because of Monsieur Jean-Noël and Mademoiselle Marie-Ange, who have already had more than their share of misfortune. . ."

Madame de La Monnerie reflected, imagining the consequences, the autopsy, the police, the detective inspectors, the headlines, the photographs in the newspapers, and her family held up to popular curiosity. "The daughter of the poet Jean de La Monnerie. . . A drama of drunkenness and jealousy in an historic château. . . The huntsman covered up the crime. . ." Gabriel would be shown being led away between two police officers. And then it would all start again when the trial took place in which she, the Comtesse de La Monnerie, would have to give evidence. . . "It will reflect on our whole class. . ." she thought.

"You were quite right, Laverdure," she said. "Silence is better than a scandal. And if Monsieur De Voos is guilty, well, if he's not punished in this world, he will be in the next. . . In any case you've done us all a great service. You've behaved like a man much above your station."

"Madame la Comtesse is too kind," replied the huntsman, bowing his head. "Oh, there's one other thing," he added, "does Monsieur le Marquis want us to hunt in spite of it all?"

"There can be no question of it," said Madame de La Monnerie.

The day was spent in attending to the formalities and receiving the first visits of sympathy. Gabriel, his shoulders sagging, his glance vague, repeated twenty times: "I don't understand. . . She must have heard Laverdure and me setting out. . . She must have gone to the balcony to call me perhaps, I don't know. . . And to think that I did not want to wake her up."

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By the mere fact of saying it, he could now see the whole picture quite distinctly, himself walking quietly across the park with the huntsman, and Jacqueline opening the window on to the balcony, trying to see them in the dark, and suddenly falling, when he was already too far away to hear the sound.

Madame van Heeren came alone. Her husband had returned from Paris by train, "rather unwell," she explained. Gabriel managed to see her only for a moment.

Gilon was a great help to Gabriel, said all the right things, and meddled—intelligently for once—with things that did not concern him. Even though he had arrived only at half past ten, in hunting clothes as usual, one might have thought to listen to him that he had picked up Jacqueline's body himself.

On several occasions the Marquis, replying to people who came to express their sympathy to him, said: "Have they killed yet?"

Ultimately, towards evening Madame de La Monnerie and Gabriel found themselves alone together. It was a painful moment, which Madame de La Monnerie was the first to resolve.

"Gabriel," she said, "I do not know, and I do not ever wish to know, if there is a weight on your conscience. The only thing I wish to ask you is this, should you feel the need to go to confession, do so in a town where none of us is known, and even, if possible, abroad."

It was dictating to him, as clearly as possible, his future conduct.

"But not at once," she added, "so that it should not look like a flight. To begin with, and for some time, you must replace my daughter in the running of Mauglaives and, indeed, it's your duty, as guardian to the children. Don't worry, I shall supervise you."

Thereupon they went into the little salon. The blind man was sitting by the gryphon chimney-piece, the "hunting box" placed in front of him, while his hands were running over the little green bumps.

Laverdure, standing before him in the same clothes he had worn in the morning, his cap in his hand, was saying: "Then my boar ran down the whole length of the Allée des Dames."

He was telling the story of one of last season's hunts which the old man had forgotten.

Gabriel was shocked to see Madame de La Monnerie sit down in the chair opposite the Marquis, which had been Jacqueline's place.

IX

The family deaths, until that of their mother, had only put Marie-Ange and Jean-Noël into minor mourning: white dresses with mauve sashes, then mauve dresses with white sashes, sailor suits, then Eton jackets, though care had been taken to choose trousers of a sufficiently dark shade of grey to serve both for the first communion and for funerals.

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But on this occasion the two children were condemned to wear black for six months.

Marie-Ange remembered her disappointment when, at the age of six, the day of her grandfather the poet's funeral, they had brought her a white frock instead of the grown-up's dress and black veil she had imagined and hoped for. These kinds of joys always arrive too late.

Now Marie-Ange was exasperated by the sad cotton stockings, black as soot, which she was compelled to wear and had, each morning, to attach to grey suspenders.

"They might at least have been silk!" she said to Jean-Noël. "It's not clothes that prove one's sorrow."

When the summer holidays arrived, Madame de La Monnerie went to Dinard, taking her grandchildren with her. The latter were now once more allowed bare legs, a white piqué skirt or a shirt with an open collar.

Every day before luncheon Madame de La Monnerie, leaning on a long closed sunshade, went for a walk with Jean-Noël.

During the walk Marie-Ange, who had worked very badly at school during the last year—"there are explanations, but that's no excuse," said Madame de La Monnerie—remained shut up in the hotel at her lessons.

Any other child but Jean-Noël would have been bored or humiliated by having to accompany every day an old lady who was cross, authoritarian and deaf. Jean-Noël, on the other hand, extracted a sort of sullen pleasure from walking with his grandmother, carrying the packet of light biscuits she bought in a shop, and meeting elderly people whose wrinkles, gestures and clothes he was never tired of observing. After all, they were the same beings, but washed, educated and well-dressed, as the beggars who used to line up at the door of the Schoudler house and to whom his great-grandfather Siegfried gave alms.

The contemplation of old age was a pleasure of which Jean-Noël never grew tired and which satisfied in him a double need for cruelty and pity. He was not, however, one of those sly, pampered, hypocritical little boys who live at their grandmother's skirts. Jean-Noël was now entering adolescence, he was tall, a little pale perhaps, had a fair, clear complexion, considerable natural elegance of limb, and an expression which was at once honest and deep.

Old age, tragedy and death had been too evident about his cradle and childhood not to leave in him a certain morbid residue. The abrupt announcement, six months earlier, at the chalet in the mountains, of his mother's death, had, amid his tears, completed his education in misfortune.

Madame de La Monnerie was accustomed, after their walk, to go and sit in a deck-chair on the beach, and point out to Jean-Noël the women walking on the promenade.

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"You're fifteen now," she said, "and since your parents are dead someone must form your taste for you. Now look at that one, do you think she's pretty? You don't like her? Well, you're wrong; she's a little buxom, but has great charm. I had a very beautiful body myself, so I know what I'm talking about."

Light dresses, clinging bathing-dresses, ankles appearing above sandals, the movement of bronzed thighs, naked arms, the shapes of breasts, all became objects of study. Madame de La Monnerie was not aware of the boy's occasional embarrassment, nor of the way in which women and some men already looked at him, any more than she was conscious of the loudness of her own voice.

"Well, yes, look, grandmother, there's a pretty one," Jean-Noël whispered from time to time.

"My poor child," replied Madame de La Monnerie, "you clearly have no taste, and I wonder why I take so much trouble about you. You'll never appreciate anyone but prostitutes!"

If till lunch-time Madame de La Monnerie tyrannized over her grandchildren, for the afternoon, since she spent it playing bridge, she relied confidently on the effects of the admirable education instilled during the morning.

Jean-Noël had made friends on the beach with some English people much older than himself. A fair, pale woman, among others, taught him to smoke, drink a glass of whisky at six o'clock, and to lie silently beside her under a sunshade, while she drew pictures mechanically in the sand; they always began with male sexual organs and ended with a bunch of flowers. Jean-Noël blushed a little, while the blonde woman, her eyes half-closed, watched him, her breathing growing quicker. Every day Jean-Noël returned to the glass of whisky, the drawings and the blonde woman as to a drug with which he peopled his nights. He studied the faint blush which incomprehensibly sometimes mounted to her pale cheeks; he imagined her "when she would be old"; he waited, his heart beating a little, for her to make advances or proposals to him; but she never did. The drawing in the sand and the proximity of his adolescent body no doubt sufficed her.

There were also two men of about thirty, handsome, slender, delicate of voice and gesture, who incessantly watched them discreetly, or rather watched Jean-Noël, and it was with them that he went to swim when the fair woman was tired of her drawing and turned her pale stomach to the sun.

Marie-Ange ruled over several boys of her own age. She shook back her hair, gave orders, laughed too loud, liked being ducked in the sea or seized round the waist by those she challenged to a race.

The brother and sister often reproached each other with their behaviour, which might have been due to jealousy. But they stood up for each other in total alliance against their grandmother.

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One evening, when they were alone on the beach, their usual friends having already gone home, Marie-Ange, stretched out beside Jean-Noël, began making vague marks on the sand with her fingers.

"I know I shall be unhappy in life," she murmured.

Jean-Noël was assailed by the same oppressive uneasiness he felt when with the fair English woman. Marie-Ange's bathing-dress had slipped down and revealed nearly the whole of her breast.

"You don't care a damn, you're a boy," she added, while her eyes ran over her brother's body.

In a moment there was established a sort of intimacy between them which they made no attempt to combat. She took a handful of sand and let it trickle on to his neck. He bit her hand. It was doubtless the signal they were awaiting to set each other at defiance, call each other idiots, and hurl themselves on each other, to roll over and over, bodies clasped, half-fighting, half-laughing, making the sand spurt round them, until they were able, under the mutually accepted excuse of battle, to touch, feel, hold, knead with anxious hands, those parts of their bodies they dreamed of knowing and clasping in other men and other women.

For the last bathers they were just two children playing on the beach . . .

The first who cried "You're hurting me!" stopped this avid game of learning. They got up breathless. They had but approached physical pleasure, its foreshadowing, without even daring to recognize it as such, for the fact of being brother and sister still opposed a blank wall to their imaginings.

Nevertheless, they went home silently, holding each other's hands, aware both of a secret joy and a shared shame, which linked them still more closely and gave them a greater respect for each other.

X

After Jacqueline's death, Gabriel De Voos had completely given up drinking. One might have thought that it was remorse; but it was above all the fear of getting drunk and giving things away.

But he lived in a sort of daze which was due to no drug except that insubstantial one he manufactured himself in the deepest layers of his own thoughts.

He had suddenly grown older; his shoulders sagged a little.

"How he must suffer, that poor man," people said. "Nothing seems to distract him."

Gabriel lived almost entirely at Mauglaives, where he dealt competently with the day-to-day business.

He hunted, always kept up with hounds, talked as little as possible,

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and outrode the few long-nosed country-gentlemen who still continued to come out with the hunt.

Van Heeren, laid low with an attack of gout, both legs encased in boots of cotton wool, could no longer hunt.

Often, when he was galloping down a ride, Gabriel would turn his head to one side, as if he was expecting Jacqueline's horse to come up.

The Chêne-Brûlé, the Allée des Dames, the Rond du Seigneur, the path by the Fongrelle lake, the Combe-aux-Loups, indeed, there were so many places, of which, when they passed them, Gabriel could not help saying to the head huntsman: "Do you remember, Laverdure? That hunt with Madame la Comtesse . . . ?" And then, one day Gabriel began by saying: "You used to hunt with the Baron François? . . ."

"Lord yes, Monsieur le Comte."

And Laverdure felt a lump in his throat, without being able to define what singular shape unhappiness was assuming in Gabriel's mind.

Gilon was the only person whom Gabriel could see constantly with any pleasure. They dined together at Mauglaives or at Montprély nearly every evening.

"You know, my dear Gabriel," the old Dragoon said one day, "you ought to let a little time go by and then, one fine day, marry again. If you don't, you'll become like me, an old fellow with a fat stomach, a lonely life, and no sense in his head."

"Oh, no! Oh, no!" Gabriel replied. "This time I should be the widower . . . I don't want to make anyone suffer."

Gabriel had set up a sort of altar on the chimney-piece of his room, with photographs of Jacqueline and François; he had them bedecked with flowers and spent long hours before them in silent contemplation.

Sometimes, gazing at the photograph of François Schoudler, with the helmet and horsetail of 1914, in faded sepia, Gabriel murmured, his eyes moist: "Perhaps you'll forgive me . . . Perhaps you'll understand . . . Perhaps you'll accept me with you both up above, even if she doesn't want to . . ."

One night, without anybody realizing it, Urbain de La Monnerie died. The spider's thread that held him to life had broken in his sleep.

The vault in the Mauglaives chapel was full. Certain arrangements and building operations had to be done before the Marquis could be placed there. Gabriel, in a black overcoat, supervised the work.

Jacqueline's coffin had not even lost its varnish. Gabriel leaned his forehead against it for a few moments. "François is in Père Lachaise," he thought. "She is here; where shall I be?"

Then, aloud, he said to the workmen: "Come on, get on with it!"

The handsome coffin of Jean de La Monnerie was already broken, half-rotted and disintegrating, revealing the lead casket in which the

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great man of the family slept, soldered into the soft metal which isolated him from his relations.

On the stone shelves other broken oak planks revealed hollow faces and skeleton bodies. On the lowest shelves all traces of wood had disappeared, and huge carved sword-hilts, engraved plates and silver Crucifixes were mingled with the skeletons.

One old lady had preserved black stockings on her tibias; they were astonishingly intact but fell to dust as soon as they were touched.

There were also the little bones of children, which they gathered up, several little skulls they placed at the back of the vault, so as to make room. And yet here were only a century's dead, for, before the Revolution, the Mauglaives had all been buried in the village church.

The shelves were cleaned and repaired and everything put in order; symmetry ruled among the dead. From the bottom of the vault rose that cool, dank smell which is the odour of vanished humanity.

Then Gabriel had also to go in to the questions of inheritance; in principle these should have been quite simple, Jacqueline's children succeeding to everything.

It was then that two sour-looking people appeared; they were in their fifties, had dry hands and yellow faces, and opposed the inheritance because they were the son and daughter of Madame Bondumont, and their mother had been married to the Marquis by a civil marriage.

"Really," said Gabriel to Gilon, when he heard the news, "it was you who organized the marriage of the old people and came and fetched old Urbain, and you never even thought of having a contract for the separation of property drawn up? Yet you knew that these people existed."

A violent scene took place between the two friends, and they parted in enmity.

"And that's all the thanks I get," thought Gilon, furiously angry, mainly with himself, as he went back to Montprély.

They had to go to law, and it was Gabriel, as deputy guardian, who had to bring the case. He pleaded the nullity of the marriage on the grounds of informality, duress of one of the participants and the irresponsibility of both contracting parties.

The Bondumont heirs argued the moral prejudice that the long liaison between the Marquis and their mother had caused her and themselves; and pleaded that the absence of a contract expressly proved the Marquis's desire to make "reparation."

Gabriel could produce only a ten-year-old will in which Urbain appointed his brothers as his heirs; but he had been the last of them to die.

The opponents asserted that, as the direct descendants of a woman who had been the deceased's mistress for thirty years, they had as much moral right as a nephew and niece in the second degree.

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The lawsuit proved very expensive, and Gabriel lost it. The inheritance was divided into two. The court nevertheless recognized that the Château of Mauglaives and all its contents should go to the La Monnerie heirs. Which was satisfactory from the moral point of view, but a catastrophe from the financial.

For the valuation of Mauglaives, its park and its contents was greater than the monetary estate. Part of the woods and land had also to be given up to the Bondumonts, and several of the farms had to be sold to pay the cost of the lawsuit and death duty.

Thus Jean-Noël and Marie-Ange, who had been born the richest babies in Paris, saw, by the time they had barely reached adolescence, the second instalment of the immense fortune, which had been their birthright, disappear. Orphans, whose father and mother had died in equally mysterious and tragic circumstances, they had to face life alone, having been brought up with the habits and outlook conditioned by wealth, merely to inherit a huge half-medieval, half-Renaissance fortress, whose roofs they would not even be able to keep in repair. They were now old enough to understand their position, and began to look at their circumstances and the world in general with a certain hardness.

Furthermore they were going to change their guardian for the fourth time.

For indeed, one day in October 1932 Gabriel presented old Madame de La Monnerie with his accounts, drawn up with a handsome margin and lines in red ink.

He had decided to rejoin the Army, and had asked Sylvaine to obtain for him Simon Lachaume's support, that he might be posted to the regiment of his choice in southern Algeria.

Madame de La Monnerie, surprising though it may seem, was quite sorry to see Gabriel go; she had become accustomed to him during these last months and had found many good qualities in him. "Pity," she thought, "that he did not get on with my daughter."

Aunt Isabelle was appointed guardian to replace Gabriel.

Mauglaives was shut up, and only Florent and his wife remained there to keep the rooms aired.

The balustrade of the balcony had not been repaired. The broken stones had merely been put on one side.

It was agreed that Laverdure should keep a few hounds and two horses so as to preserve, under the vague authority of Commandant Gilon, with whom Gabriel had now made it up, a sort of nucleus of a hunt. "Monsieur Jean-Noël will decide what he wants to do when he comes of age . . ."

Laverdure also undertook all the duties of bailiff and agent.

When Gabriel received his posting, he came to Mauglaives for the last time, and collected from a tin trunk his smart red tunic with its

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rows of decorations and his blue Spahi cap, which had been perfectly preserved in mothballs. The tunic was a bit tight, and Gabriel had the impression that even his head had grown larger, for the cap was tight too.

Then he packed up his personal belongings, adding to them a few relics of Jacqueline and François.

It was evening.

For the last time, preceded by the dim light of a lamp carried by old Florent, he went through the huge rooms, peopled with noblemen who seemed to have been embedded, standing, in the mortar of the walls. He moved forward beneath the high ceilings with their little golden roses like stars in the firmament of night, went by suits of armour holding dusty standards in their gauntlets, and chimney-pieces opening huge stone jaws among the shadows as if to engulf the passer-by within the earth.

The car was waiting for him in the courtyard, the last car Jacqueline had given Gabriel, the only thing that remained to him from his marriage, which he was going to sell before sailing.

"Good luck, Monsieur le Comte," said Laverdure, his head turned a little aside to hide his emotion.

"Thank you, Laverdure. I'll write to you," replied Gabriel pressing the old huntsman's hand.

And he went off to sink his life, like a watercourse, in the desert sands.

BOOK THREE

RENDEZVOUS
IN HELL

To Donine de Saint-Sauveur

The Monsters' Ball

THE Préfecture of Police had to supply an inspector and a detachment of constables whenever a minister was expected at a party; thus it was that, during the second half of spring, there was never a day when there were not police on special duty at the door of some member of the Academy, an editor of some newspaper, a duchess, an eminent lawyer or a great banker, for directing traffic and controlling the parking of cars.

The chestnut trees in the avenues still carried their last white candles; tulips were flowering in the beds of the Tuileries at the feet of the marble statues and of the young couples on the benches, petrified in the act of kissing.

Yet every evening, between five and eight o'clock, in the bottle-neck of the Louvre gates or the congestion about the Opéra, behind the big green buses taking their cargoes of labour and weariness home, there crowded the stream of private cars, inside which important people, or people who thought themselves important or wished to be important, grew impatient and suffered from each lost moment as if it were the extraction of a nerve.

Paris was at the height of the season.

Each in their turn, three hundred hostesses moved their furniture and cleaned their silver, hired the same extra waiters, stripped the same flower-shops, ordered the same *petits fours*, the same pyramids of white or brown bread sandwiches, filled with the same anchovies or the same greenstuff, from the same caterers, merely to find when their guests had gone that their apartments were as devastated as if a campaigning army had passed through them, their furniture heaped with empty glasses and dirty plates, brown marks from cigarettes on their carpets, stains on their table-cloths, their marquetry covered with sticky rings, their flowers suffocated in the *melée* of the crowd. And then to fall exhausted into a chair and all utter the same phrase: "On the whole it really went very well . . ."

And the next day, if not that very night, overcoming their real or feigned fatigue, they rushed off to similar parties.

For it was always the same few hundred people, the best known

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names in politics, letters, the arts, medicine, the bar, the most powerful names in finance and the world of business, the most remarkable of the visiting foreigners (who indeed were often visiting merely for the occasion), the most promising or able among the young, the richest among the rich, the idlest among the idle, the most upper of crusts among the aristocracy, the most fashionable people in the world, who were to be seen climbing the stairs, jostling each other, herding together, embracing, smiling, toadying, staring at each other and hating each other.

The publication of a book, the first-night of a film, the hundredth performance of a play, the return of an explorer, the departure of a diplomat, the opening of a picture gallery, a new record set up by a pilot, all these were excuses for a party.

Every week some new clique, provided it was supported by the Press, revealed genius which failed to last two months, stifled by its own success like a torch by its own smoke.

Paris then displayed in the matter of dresses, jewels and ornaments all that art and fashion could devise. Taste and imagination, as well as money, were lavished on clothes, décor and display.

It was a fabulous Vanity Fair whose like the world had perhaps never seen! What inner urge drove these people on to entertain each other, invite each other, reply to invitations, pretend to be enjoying themselves when they were bored to death, dance out of politeness with partners whom they disliked, abstain discreetly from dancing with those they desired, become annoyed if they were omitted from a list, but groan whenever they received another invitation card, applaud books and authors whom they despised, be despised by the very people they applauded, lavish smiles on people who were indifferent to them, protest their dislike of society, their boredom with the fashionable world, and yet dissipate in these strange frolics their time, their strength and their money?

It was in this fair, where everyone was at once patron and petitioner, salesman and customer, that the most subtle form of barter in the world was carried on: that of power and celebrity.

Success and power are not, as is generally supposed, articles that are sold; they are exchanged.

There are far fewer of the corrupt, of monopolists, of holders of benefices, of paid sycophants, and out-and-out prostitutes than people pretend.

The rules of the game are much more subtle; it is a matter of reciprocity, a labour of human spiders, in which each one, to manufacture his own web, must allow his feet to be caught in the webs of others.

Vanity Fair was also a market of women and boys, for power and success, when all is said and done, are but rights to love, except in extreme cases, when they replace love.

THE MONSTERS' BALL

Political power lent this parade, which formed part of it, both true and false values, as well as official sanction.

At night the façades of the great buildings were lit by huge flood-lights that lent their massive architecture, their bas-reliefs, their colonnades and balustrades an enchanting, fairy-like quality. The fountains of the Place de la Concorde were enveloped in a glowing, luminous mist. And the foremost dignitaries of the Republic, passing between guards clothed in white buckskin and horse-tailed helmets, climbed the stairs of subsidized theatres to preside at gala performances, whose excuse was some charitable end.

Moreover, that year the Universal Exhibition—the latest in a line going back to 1867 which had already produced five generations of stucco pavilions, propaganda and gold medals—was to open its doors. Indeed, there were to be two seasons and, in the second, as was from time to time necessary, the populace would be allowed to participate to some extent.

II

Simon Lachaume arrived at Inès Sandoval's ball a few minutes before midnight. Twelve days earlier he had received an invitation which read:

THE COMTESSE SANDOVAL

AT HOME

among a few select friends, at her

BALL OF BEASTS

(you will be provided with a mask especially conceived and designed for you by Anet Brayat)

"Well," thought Simon, "this appears to be the season when she's a Comtesse. Of course there are a lot of foreigners in Paris just now..."

For indeed, during the winter, clothed in the high simplicity of literary fame, the poetess used her name only.

Inès Sandoval's vast apartment, situated, or rather anchored, on the second floor of an old private house on the Quai d'Orléans, normally resembled the interior of the stronghold of a pirate ship. The poetess liked precious stones lying loose in ciboriums, heavy ancient damasks with fringed borders, Orthodox crucifixes, Spanish Virgins with baroque pearls round their necks, strangely shaped guitars and heavy, smoke-coloured Renaissance coffers. Gold-embroidered hangings, divided in the middle, took the place of doors.

In her hall there was a huge aviary, from which blue parakeets, curly-feathered canaries and waxbills filled the air with their exotic cries and a stale odour of hot wings. Grey, long-haired Persian cats

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fled silently down the passages, the memories of some unknown remorse behind their golden eyes, unless it was merely the sadness of their emasculation.

Dead animals, stuffed birds under glass globes, parrots from Meissen and Sèvres, their cries strangled in their porcelain throats, Staffordshire pugs about the carpets, tortoises with inlaid shells, water-colours of alarming feline shapes on the walls, rabbits beating drums and elephants, shaggy as those one gives children, all combined to complicate the décor.

It was her passion for animals which had incited Inès Sandoval to choose the theme for her ball.

"Good evening, Monsieur le Ministre. I believe there is a mask reserved for your Excellency," a black-coated servant told Simon.

"How does the fellow know me?" Simon wondered. And then he realized that the hired waiter had no doubt handed him drinks on six occasions during the past week, and had given him his hat and gloves at six different front doors.

The waiter, having searched among the relics of the wholesale decapitation of some zoological garden, that lay loosely piled on a big table, handed the Minister a cardboard and tulle octopus.

Simon smiled at his memories.

During the period of his brief adventure with Inès—which in the chronology of Simon's love-affairs, had come before his liaison with Marthe Bonnefoy—the poetess used to say: "You are my beloved octopus. Your arms encircle me and drag me down to submarine depths of joy."

And now, nine years later, this cephalopod mask was a delicate reminder.

"As long as there are no photographs," Simon thought; "but if there are, it's better on the whole to be masked."

A crowd of beings, half-men half-beasts, or rather half-men half-monsters, were crushed together in nightmare disorder; the "few select friends" had become nearly two hundred; and the hubbub of their voices at moments drowned the band. For Inès Sandoval's ball Anet Brayat, an *avant garde* painter, had refashioned the Creation; the masks, born of his imagination, interpreted nature beyond the confines of the real and re-created in novel form the labours of Jehovah's fifth day. Ruffled owls with violet faces and golden beaks, huge heads of flies, their eyes sparkling with brass wire, rabbits of leopard-skin, multi-tongued snakes labelled: "French, English, German, Spanish," red velvet cats, sheep with steel-wool fleeces, yellow donkeys, sea-green fish, a handsaw or a child's hammer at the brow, walruses tattooed in morse code, porcelain insulators at their foreheads, horses in skeleton, feathered cockchafers, indigo frogs and green pelicans stood about in tail-coats and long evening dresses. A Commander of the Legion of

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Honour wore a rose-coloured lion's head decorated with sergeant-major's moustaches, Gutta-percha elephant-trunks hung down over boiled shirts. Bare arms, laden with diamond bracelets, were raised, not to wave a powder-puff, but to straighten a guinea-fowl's comb or a ray's fin.

The guests seemed delighted with the spectacle they presented to each other, and amused themselves by assuming the characters of their masks. They were to be heard clucking, braying, lowing, croaking. A mauve pig made his way through the crowd pretending to root in the women's bosoms with his snout.

This strange biped crowd had gathered more particularly in one of the drawing-rooms where they were waddling to and fro to the rhythm of the band. The bandsmen were disguised as monkeys; their instruments could barely be heard. The room was like an infernal cauldron in which all the creatures of abortion imagined by the sick in the fever of delirium were being brought to the boil together.

The hostess moved from group to group, her face half-hidden beneath a bird's mask from which, at the level of her ears, spread two large green wings that swept across other masks as she passed by. She was rather a short woman, with bare brown shoulders and nails lacquered the colour of dark blood; her dress was the same colour as her wings.

Inès Sandoval had a very slight limp, due to an almost imperceptible shortness of the right leg, and she used it to splendid advantage. She advanced in a series of eighths of a circle, pirouetting slightly from side to side, as if she were continually throwing back an invisible train and about to curtsy at every step.

Her remarks seemed designed to create an illusion that she suffered from excessive and spontaneous kindness of heart.

When congratulated on the success of her ball, she replied: "But I had nothing to do with it, nothing at all. It's all due to Brayat's talent and your kindness in coming."

Anet Brayat, a plump little man with fat feet and upturned toes, an enormous mop of hair, a red beard and a dinner-jacket so dirty that one might have supposed he had clasped his palette to his chest before coming out, thrust his stomach before him and bowed politely in acknowledgement of the compliments. He was holding in front of his face, by means of a wooden handle, a goat's mask, drawn like the masque of antique comedy, which was a clear enough way of saying: "I've made pretty good fools of you, haven't I?"

The ball must have cost a great deal of money and one might well wonder how Inès Sandoval had been able to raise it, and how Brayat, who always had many commissions on hand and no money, had found time to design the masks.

The composer Auguérenc, rigged out as a dolphin (*"C'est pour*

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qu'Orphée enfin—Porte le dauphin...” Inès quoted to him), drew Simon into a corner, clutching him by the decorations in his buttonhole, and whispered the explanation to him.

It was simply that the huge, old and extremely wealthy Mrs Worms-Parnell, whom Brayat had this evening transformed into a dove, had ordered another complete set of masks for an identical party to be given by her in America; while, more immediately, there was to be a completely spontaneous suggestion that the evening should be immortalized by the publication, in an expensive limited edition, of Brayat's designs, each one captioned with a quatrain by Inès, to which the “select friends” would find it difficult not to subscribe. It was expected to show a profit of two hundred thousand francs.

A photographer, letting off his flashlight at point-plank range, blinded the Minister for National Education and the composer, as they stood gossiping. Simon made a gesture of impatience. And at that very moment, through the flash of the magnesium, he saw Sylvaine Dual coming towards him disguised as a lobster. From the actress's assumed air of disdain, the tension manifest in her shoulders and the way she was crushing her gold bag in her fingers, Simon realized that there was going to be a scene and he quickly broke away from Auguérenc.

He took Sylvaine's hand as if he they had not seen each other that very day, as if the actress were not his official and admitted mistress, and he automatically raised it to his mask.

He realized that several monsters standing round were watching them from their shadowy eyes.

“You see you could perfectly well have come to fetch me, or at least sent your chauffeur,” said Sylvaine. “I notice that when a party amuses you, your duties keep you less late than usual. Of course you couldn't miss for my sake even five minutes of this delightful hop, ridiculous though it is.”

She was wearing a dress that moulded her bust and hips into a flowing figure of scintillating dark blue and sequins, hobbled her legs, and flowed out again from the ankles in vague fin-like movements, accentuating the sensuality of her body and her movements.

Sylvaine was furious: furious because she had not been included in the photograph and the newspapers would not show her next to “her” Minister, furious because the lobster mask seemed to her to indicate an insulting intention on the part of Inès, furious because Simon had left her to come alone.

Entangled in the tulle tentacles covering his chest, Simon replied that the Cabinet meeting had finished earlier than was expected and, what was more, the only reason he had come to the ball at all was due to the obligations of friendship.

“Yes, because you slept with the woman ten years ago, I know,” Sylvaine replied, “and when the Minister goes to the house of one of

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his old mistresses, he doesn't like arriving with me, and giving the impression that we're living together! How cowardly you are in these women's presence, my poor Simon! Well, I suppose you're delighted with the party, they're all here. Your dear Marthe Bonnefoy, who's old enough to be your mother, your . . ."

"And you, of course, have no one here, no one from your past?" Simon muttered. "You're pure, of course, you're a virgin. Wilner, for instance, is not here of course," he said, making a gesture towards the famous dramatist whose tall, heavy body could easily be recognized under the head of the bull Apis with golden horns. "And if this hop, as you call it, was being given by one of your friends, you'd think it was perfect."

Through the holes in their masks the lobster and the octopus looked at each other with hatred. They kept their voices low, feigning normal drawing-room chatter. But their own voices echoed beneath their cardboard heads, thundered in their ears and made them boil in a water-bath of anger.

"Anyway I'm not ashamed of being seen with you," Sylvaine went on.

"Naturally not, you've everything to gain by it," Simon replied.

After long months of intrigue, pulling strings and bringing pressure to bear, he had recently succeeded in getting Sylvaine into the Comédie Française, and he thought this gave him the right to a few weeks' peace.

"Swine! A swine and a cad into the bargain!" said Sylvaine. "If that's how things are, enjoy yourself, my dear; I shall try my best to do as much."

They were separated by a waiter who presented his tray.

"She'll always have the soul of a whore," thought Simon as he moved away. It seemed to him that their liaison must inevitably and immediately come to an end. But he had been telling himself that for five years. He had never broken things off with any woman as often as he had with Sylvaine. One day it was bound to come true.

"How can one love someone one despises without having a despicable nature oneself?" This was the question his liaison had always posed him.

And Simon wondered what sort of woman would succeed in detaching him from Sylvaine. There was not one who, in recent times, in spite of brief adventures which he kept quiet or pretended to keep quiet, had inspired him with any real emotion.

Who was it who had once said to him . . . Yes, it must have been Jean de La Monnerie, the old poet, who had said: "You'll see, after a certain age one falls in love with a woman only so as to break with another. And that's when love-affairs start becoming infernal."

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III

At a masked ball, particularly one of this kind, everyone very soon identifies everyone else, and the only people who do not recognize each other are generally those who have never seen each other before. So a great many masks seemed to be intrigued by a couple who had just entered; buffaloes, owls, rabbits and rhinoceroses bent their heads to ask each other, beak to ear: "Who are they?"

The new arrivals were very young and, as far as it was possible to determine, very good-looking. The boy, tall and very slender, looking taller still in his tail-coat, had beautiful pale tapering hands, and seemed to raise his white, silver-antlered stag's head towards the stucco of the ceiling with a noble air. The girl (or young woman, one really could not tell which) wore the mask of a black hind above a white dress draped in classical style. Her body was perfectly proportioned; she was perhaps less delicately built than the young man, but the flesh on her slender limbs was exquisitely firm.

"That girl must be ravishing," thought Simon as he watched the couple move towards Inès Sandoval; and from curiosity he went across the room to them.

"My dear, why don't you dance with this pretty girl; though she doesn't know it, you have many memories in common," said Inès to Simon.

"Who is she?" he murmured.

"My dear," cried the poetess, "she'll tell you if she wants to. This is an evening of mystery."

And she went off, taking with her the young man in the stag's mask.

The monkey bandmen were playing a tango, and the dancers were gently swaying beneath their fantastic heads.

Simon took the unknown girl in his arms. He could feel the firm shapely back beneath the pleated silk of her dress. Simon knew he danced badly, but the crush was so great that it hardly mattered. It was enough to let oneself be carried round in the crowd. The young body, neither bold nor withdrawn, whose curves and ease of movement he could feel against his own, the light, calm hand placed in his, gave Simon considerable pleasure and the hope of the beginning of an adventure.

"Tell me, who are you?" he asked.

He expected the hind's mask to play the easy game to intrigue him: "Guess!... French?.... Not French?.... Married?.... No... You're getting warm... You're getting cold."

The unknown, looking at the dancers round her, said: "Doesn't it look like a picture by Hieronymus Bosch?"

She had a clear, well-modulated voice.

Then she said simply: "I'm Marie-Ange Schoudler."

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"No!" cried Simon. "Do you mean to say you're the daughter of Jacqueline and François? How extraordinary! I understand now why Inès..."

His astonishment made him miss the beat for two steps; and, as if it might permit him to see the girl's face, he automatically raised his mask.

The cavernous eyes of the octopus above his forehead, and the rippling tentacles about his collar made him look like a minor, poisonous, marine deity emerging suddenly from the depths.

"I'm Simon Lachaume," he said.

"Oh, of course, you knew all the family well," said Marie-Ange Schoudler without showing any other sign of surprise.

And after a while she added, though Simon could not tell whether she said it with ironic politeness or real deference: "It's a great honour to be dancing with you, Monsieur le Ministre." But she did not raise her mask.

"And only a moment ago," went on Simon, "I was thinking of your La Monnerie grandfather. You know, I remember you when you were quite small, and now here you are; life really is astonishing! And yet it's all quite natural, I suppose; it only surprises ourselves. Marie-Ange!" he murmured, as if to convince himself of some incredible event.

Memories were surging up in Simon's mind. Memories of ten, fifteen and seventeen years before.

Fifteen years seemed nothing to live through, and yet suddenly they took on the quality of an avalanche.

"How old are you now?"

"Twenty-two."

"Yes, of course..." said Simon.

And so the child, whom a governess had held by the hand at the big funerals, the slip of a girl in white socks who used to play in the gardens of the Avenue de Messine, had become this adult being, this female body, close and mysterious. Simon was filled with that banal surprise one feels when faced with the growing up of the generations that follow on our own, that come to join us, that suddenly manifest their independence, their autonomy, to our faces.

"Is she still a virgin?" he wondered. From the poised ease of the body whose shoulder, breast and hip touched his without effrontery or timidity, he was on the whole inclined to answer: "No." Marie-Ange was silent behind her mask. "I dare say I'm boring her," Simon thought. "She must be bored to death with people saying: 'I knew your father, your mother, your grandparents well!' She would doubtless rather exist in her own right. Anyway, unless you want to be treated as senile, it's not very intelligent to tell a woman that you once held her on your knee."

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"And who's the young man you came with?" he asked.

"My brother Jean-Noël," she replied.

"Oh, now I understand," thought Simon. For indeed he had recently heard it said that the young Schoudler and Inès Sandoval . . . He looked round for them but could not see them.

A big butterfly mask came up and danced beside Simon and Marie-Ange.

"Have you ever thought," she said, "about butterflies that only live forty-eight hours and are born during a period of bad weather? They have to spend their forty-eight hours of life in the rain and can know nothing else in the world."

She spoke without affectation, in the level voice with which she had answered his questions.

Simon wondered what her comment signified.

"Inès Sandoval might have made that remark," he said.

"Yes, perhaps. So much the worse," she replied.

"Why? Don't you like Inès?"

"Oh yes," said Marie-Ange with the cold indifference that seemed to underlie all her words.

Bosch's pictures, butterflies born in bad weather . . . The girl surprised him and seemed difficult to get to know. Or was it the mere fact of her youth that made her appear so impenetrable?

"Let's go and have a glass of champagne," he said.

He wanted to question Marie-Ange, find out how she lived, what she did, whether she was engaged.

All he could learn was that she worked at a dressmaker's.

IV

Meanwhile Inès Sandoval had led Jean-Noël Schoudler into the hall. They were standing by the aviary. The sound of the band and the noise of voices were diminished by the brocade curtains over the doorway. The parakeets winked and huddled together in disgust.

In her green mask Inès Sandoval was like a sort of ogress among birds.

"Why did you get here so late, darling?" she asked.

"Because of Granny. It's the end. We thought we wouldn't be able to come at all," replied Jean-Noël. "I hope she doesn't die tonight."

"Oh, my poor sweet, how frightful! Are you very fond of your grandmother?"

"No," the young man replied.

And they both began laughing behind their cardboard and feathers.

"It's the first time I've seen you in a tail-coat, my sweet little stag," Inès Sandoval went on.

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She took him by the shoulders and made him turn round to look at his back.

"I wonder if the fact that it wasn't made for me shows?" Jean-Noël wondered with some dismay. He had been unable to afford a new coat. This one had been altered to fit him and had belonged to his stepfather, Gabriel De Voos. It had been found at the back of a cupboard, looking quite new and undamaged by moth.

Jean-Noël was still at that age when one has not yet learned to make a joke of lack of money and when one's assurance is terribly dependent on one's physical appearance. The boy was almost as embarrassed by his coat as if it had been hired.

"Anyway, when Granny's dead, things'll be a bit different," he thought.

"You're really very, very handsome, my angel," Inès said.

She raised her mask and, slightly protruding one hip, gazed at herself in a looking-glass to see if her make-up was all right.

She had big dark eyes in which there were violet lights as on a mountain lake, thick, very dark hair done in a manner peculiar to herself, falling lightly about her neck, a matt brown skin, and white, even teeth. But it all looked a trifle worn.

The secret substances that give the skin its ductile suppleness, hair its glow and richness, were beginning to forsake her; there were three gaunt lines on her forehead; the enamel of her teeth, though not yet discoloured, had already lost its perfect lustre, and her eyes showed sometimes intense vitality, but sometimes also a dull opacity, alternating between a strange, sombre brilliance and a lack-lustre emptiness.

She had reached the moment in life when her physical charms were about to leave her. Since she was well over forty, most women considered she had little cause for complaint.

For Jean-Noël, who had eyes for no one else, and indeed, by dint of looking at her, saw her no longer, Inès was a goddess. He was just twenty-one. Though she was not his first adventure, she was his first love worthy of the name. An aura, perceptible only to himself, surrounded Inès's head and shoulders like the rays of a monstrance.

Since he knew nothing about her but what she had told him, that is to say her marriages and bereavements, he looked on her as a woman who had suffered greatly, which was indeed true, and he felt that his duty towards her was one of redemptive consolation.

He would happily waste whole days for the two hours she would grant him, or demand of him, in the poetic disorder of her life.

Jean-Noël knew that a young writer had once committed suicide on her account. This death had to be added to two widowhoods and the loss of a child.

But Jean-Noël did not yet know that Inès had a vague reputation for bringing people bad luck.

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He took her hand, clasping that small, brown, dry palm in his white hands.

"I love you, Inès," he murmured.

"Yes, my love. You must love me, love me infinitely. I have such need of it to live," she replied. "Now, we must go. We mustn't neglect them too long."

V

They were beginning to take off their masks. Some of the guests had pushed them up on to their foreheads like antique helmets; others were fanning themselves with them, others again were amusing themselves by exchanging them and looking in the mirrors. People who had come merely to "look in" were getting ready to leave.

Inès Sandoval went over to a tall, willowy man of about sixty. He was wearing narrow trousers, white socks and pumps. He was holding the head of a legendary unicorn with an air of extreme embarrassment.

"Pem, you're not going, I hope!" cried Inès.

And, extending her hand towards Jean-Noël, she said: "I'd like to introduce Baron Schoudler, this is Lord Pemrose. Jean-Noël Schoudler is the grandson of a famous French poet. But I don't know why I'm speaking English," she added laughing, "when Lord Pemrose speaks such wonderful French."

"Yes, I speak it a little," Lord Pemrose replied with a smile and practically no accent.

Jean-Noël automatically took off his mask out of politeness, as he would have done a hat.

His face had a curiously pellucid quality in which his blue eyes alone shone with a sombre light; his hair, luminous as fresh straw, curled lightly in little gleaming points about his ears, and his features, above the high stiff collar, still retained their childish curves.

At sight of Jean-Noël's exquisitely fair and still adolescent beauty, Lord Pemrose's eyes, grey under their drooping lids, wavered for a moment as if face to face with an over-strong light; the Englishman seemed to be seeking some less disturbing object on which to fix his gaze.

Two elderly men, who were talking on the balcony a few feet away, turned at this moment. These two men were the Academician Émile Lartois and the dramatist Edouard Wilner. They also had removed their masks, though in Wilner's case it made little difference.

"Every time I hear our dear Inès introduce 'Baron Schoudler,' said Professor Lartois, "I feel I'm going to see our old friend Noël reappear, with his giant's body, sombre gaze and piratical beard. And then I see this blond boy looking like Ariel."

He smiled crookedly and bit his lip. Both he and Wilner had, at

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different periods, been the poetess's lover. They were part of what was known as "the original basis" of Inès's salon.

"Our dear friend is changing her line," Lartois went on. "The snake-charmer is becoming a charmer of chicks."

"It's the new batch of recruits, my dear fellow," replied the dramatist in his deep rumbling voice, inclining his Mycenaean head. "These whipper-snappers learn from our mistresses what they in turn learned in our beds. That is how the art of love has been transmitted from the beginning of time. And one day they will transmit to women we shall never see caresses we believe were invented by us. We shall already have rotted in the earth . . ."

He breathed deeply through his huge nostrils and added: "How old are you now, Émile?"

"Seventy-four," replied the famous doctor. "I don't feel it, but I am."

His hair had turned completely white, but he still retained his fresh complexion, the clarity of his slightly whistling voice, and his upright figure. His eyelids and his hands alone seemed a little withered.

"In four days' time I shall be seventy-six," Wilner muttered with his gargoyle-like mouth. "It's getting near the end . . ."

He stood there pensive, monumental; when he spoke, his breathing sounded hoarse, as if there were a puncture in the organ-bellows.

"Of course," he went on, "I can still be loved. Indeed, I am, and by the most exquisite creatures. I'm still capable of making a woman happy. And you too, Émile, eh? You still astonish your doctor?" he added with a wink. "We're a couple of old monsters pickled in the spirits of fame."

He turned back towards the night, towards the city that, for half a century, had lavished on him incense and given him love, models for his art and a sense of his own power.

The night was warm and the whole sky bright with stars.

Rows of windows shone in the façades of the houses on the riverbanks. The false dawn of capital cities, a vague rose-coloured glow emanating from hundreds of thousands of similar windows, outlined the roofs of the city to infinite distances. From time to time the sudden shaft of a headlight pierced the glow, rising into the dark heights and then suddenly going out.

The sound of the band lent the townscape a curious unreality.

The tall poplars growing on the point of the Ile Saint-Louis were swaying gently like so many masts. The buttresses of Notre Dame had assumed the shape of a ship's hull in the night.

Beneath the balcony the guests' cars were parked in rows, their lights extinguished. Leaning on the parapet, their chauffeurs watched the river darkly flowing. From time to time a cigarette-end described a red arc before spluttering out in the stream.

"But there comes a time," went on Edouard Wilner, "when the only true mistress is life itself. All this: the stars about which all lovers have made the same idiotic remarks; the trees, the stones on which we first opened our eyes and which will be there still when we close them; the spectacle of mankind, the magical, incoherent ballet of which each one of us is a part and in which we repeat the same steps eternally, our anxiety continually renewed; the feeling of being oneself amid the universe, of having nails of one's own, a head of one's own, an individual way of holding one's pen, of touching stuffs and bodies which belong to one alone and will soon belong to no one . . ."

Lartois listened to him, watched him and wondered: "Why is he saying all this to me? Has he a belated desire to become a member of the Academy? Or is he trying out a speech for his next play? Or does he really feel that he has come to the end of the road?"

"And, although one has loved life with all one's strength, possessed it, ransacked it, looked it each minute in the face, licked its every pore, yet the day it leaves one, bitch that it is, one still has the feeling that one has never understood it. And now it has taken up its abode," Wilner concluded, waving his huge flaccid hand towards Jean-Noël, "in a puppy like that, who'll understand it still less than we did and will make less good use of it."

And in the glance he threw the young man there was a mixture of envy and anger as there is sometimes in the glances of the poor at the spectacle of wealth.

Then, without transition, he said: "But his sister, the little hind, looks enchanting. The child's delicious, charming, exquisite. I shall go and dance with her."

"Do you still dance?" Lartois asked.

"A little flirtation still amuses me," said Wilner and walked off.

By a window Lord Pemrose, as he went on talking, was covertly watching Jean-Noël. He was observing minutely his small, well-shaped ears, the rather long oval of his chin, his thin straight nose, the curve of his mouth. And every time his eyes met the boy's, the conversation wavered for an instant.

In the presence of Lord Pemrose, Jean-Noël felt a curious sensation he was unable to define; it was neither exactly shyness nor, indeed, embarrassment, but a kind of diffused, not disagreeable, uncertainty. Pemrose's personality, his natural, willowy elegance, his rather loosely tied black tie, his peculiar manner of smoothing back the wavy lock of hair that fell across his forehead and of speaking with two fingers against his temple, seemed to Jean-Noël both odd and attractive. And the interest Lord Pemrose appeared to take in his conversation flattered him.

Lord Pemrose talked of his love for Paris and for the people one met there. It was an essential part of his life. He spent part of the year in

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France and part in Italy. What, Jean-Noël did not know Italy? Oh, what tremendous pleasures there were in store for him! Jean-Noël simply must go to Italy. "You must, you must!"

"If you ever come to Venice or Capri, when I'm there," said Lord Pemrose, "you must let me know. My greatest pleasure in life is to show the places I love to the people I love."

He gave a little inclination of the head and smiled.

A gaunt-looking woman, with a comparatively youthful outline but withered hands laden with rings, deep hollows in her shoulders and four rows of pearls round her emaciated neck, came up to them, her face concealed behind a panther's mask, and said, in an ironic tone of voice: "*Basil! Caro! Tu sei incorreggibile!*"

Lord Pemrose started, recognized the voice, the hollows and the pearls, and cried: "Oh, Lydia! How are you, my dear?"

And he introduced Jean-Noël to the panther's mask, whose name was the Duchesse de Salvimonte.

"My dear," she said, still talking to Pemrose, "when there are such handsome young people about, you should not interfere with their dancing. They're the right age for it after all! Do you dance?" she asked Jean-Noël.

She spoke all languages with a Russian accent that gave her words an unusual intonation.

Jean-Noël bowed and murmured something that sounded like an invitation.

"Come on, then," she said, taking Jean-Noël's arm.

"*Anche tu, sei incorreggibile!*" Lord Pemrose murmured.

Dancing with the Duchesse, Jean-Noël felt as if he were holding a bundle of faggots, but faggots twisted in the fire. He could see two gleaming eyes through the holes in her mask. He did not know quite what to say.

"Lord Pemrose seems a most charming man," he said.

"Basil? *Un tesoro*. He's a very old friend and I adore him," said the Duchesse.

"What does he do?"

"What does he do, my dear? He's very rich and spends a lot of money, that's all. He has also written a book on mysticism, about which, I must admit, I know nothing. The love of God, the love of angels, the love that goes on in Heaven, none of them exist as far as I'm concerned. I'm a pagan. For me love as it is made on earth is the only god . . ."

At that moment the tape that held her mask in place came untied. Jean-Noël shuddered when he saw his partner's face. She was infinitely older than he had imagined. She must be in her seventies; but in strange, aggressive and very disconcerting seventies.

She had had her face lifted several years earlier, at a time when

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facial surgery was still in its groping infancy. A thin, yellow, unhealthy-looking furrow of skin, like the scar of a burn, framed her face from ear to ear, passing beneath the chin. But the knife had not repaired her eyelids, her mouth or the wrinkles in her neck. It was as if another mask, the mask of false youth, had been applied with a band of adhesive tape between her hair, cropped short and dyed mahogany, and the four rows of pearls.

"Of course he's asked you to stay in Italy," she said. "I don't know whether I shall go there before the winter. There are so many places I've got to go to. I can't bear staying in the same place for more than a fortnight, and I always make up my mind at the last moment. I'm always hoping for the unexpected to happen. It's the unexpected that makes life worth living, don't you agree?"

Jean-Noël was not listening; he was looking at Inès standing among a group of departing guests; he was thinking of the caresses he had received that very afternoon from the thin brown hand over which foreign Ambassadors, the Governor of the Bank of France and others of the great ones of the earth were bowing so respectfully, and he felt a young and joyous pride. The Duchesse de Salvimonte, who had noticed the direction of her partner's gaze, screwed up her eyes and said: "Dear Inès, she's so charming! What a heavenly creature! She has one foot that barely touches the ground."

Meanwhile Sylvaine Dual was dancing in the arms of a Secretary of the Peruvian Legation with a spectacular abandon that was deliberately calculated to annoy Simon Lachaume.

Lachaume, who had been talking to Marthe Bonnefoy for a moment, was now looking for the young hind and saying to himself: "Really, at my age, I'm being rather absurd..." He discovered Marie-Ange dancing with Wilner and had no difficulty in imagining the words the old dramatist was pouring into the young girl's ears.

Simon also saw the old Duchesse clasped to Jean-Noël.

Lartois, who had been watching him from close by, now came up.

"I believe we're thinking exactly the same thing, my dear Simon," he said. "One would like to say to those two children: 'Go away, fly! Fly these people who are three times, almost four times, your age, and are seeking the sap of your youth as the resin is sought in the trunks of young firs. Fly this cynicism, this falsity, these vices in search of proselytes. Fly these erotomaniacs, fly these poisonous plants like Inès. Stop dancing with death. Fly from us all!' For every man here, you, I, all of us, wants that girl. And every woman over forty wants that young Schoudler, and several men too for that matter. We're all unclean."

"Such a paroxysm of moral feeling is most peculiar," said Lachaume. "Not like us at all."

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"It's the feeling we might have had if we'd had children," said Lartois. "And those are the grandchildren of very old friends. But such sentiments are nevertheless more normal in me than they are in you, for you're thirty years younger than I am."

"But nearly thirty years older than they are. And the third of a century that separates me from them is longer and weightier than the third that separates me from you, believe me."

The dance had come to an end and the band was having a moment's rest. A servant went to Jean-Noël and told him that he was wanted on the telephone.

When Jean-Noël returned, his expression was thoughtful and disconsolate; he went over to his sister and whispered in her ear the one word: "Granny."

They made their way to the door.

VI

Madame de La Monnerie had gone on playing bridge till the very end of her life.

When she could no longer get out of bed, her usual four—her cousin, Madame de Laubrières, withered and bearded like a plant in a herbarium, another old lady of immense girth, whose breasts hung down below her waist, and an old retired lawyer whose dewlaps were buttressed by an enormously high collar—came to play at her bedside.

The four of them played for a quarter of a centime, treated each other with a mixture of old-fashioned courtesy and captious intimacy, repeated the same jokes and called their daily meeting "our grand tournament."

The four old people were all widowed, and no one thought of inviting them or visiting them any more. Enclosed in the prison of a useless longevity, bridge, the last passion they could still satisfy, united them as surely, as inevitably, as a great love. They often imagined they hated each other, but this was merely because they saw each other too often; they could not get on without each other.

Necessarily and mutually tolerant, they succeeded in putting up with each other's ugliness, fads and infirmities, though each of them felt in his heart that he was being charitable towards the others.

The retired lawyer was obliged to leave the room every half-hour and, when he failed to do so, held by the excitement of the game, he would wet his chair. He sometimes failed to notice it, but there were occasions, too, when he let himself go with a sort of secret joy. At these times he felt as if he were exercising a last male privilege among these three decrepit old women whom he called his "harem." No one remarked on this physical disability, and the others contented themselves, when changing seats, with discreetly moving aside the chair he had

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occupied, with the result that, by the end of the game, there were twice as many chairs as players round the table.

Madame de La Monnerie was so deaf that it was often necessary to write the bids down on a piece of paper so that she should know what was happening. Ultimately she became so feeble that she could no longer hold the cards, and her maid had to be summoned to hold them for her.

These friends of "the grand tournament" watched her decline day by day. They felt that they had for partner a corpse who was but little older than themselves. And every evening as they crawled, sad at heart, out of the house in the Rue de Lübeck, they nodded their heads, murmuring, "Poor Juliette," and wondered whether the rubber they had just finished would not be the last.

Madame de La Monnerie was dying of tuberculosis. The illness of adolescence and old age had attacked her ancient lungs. The old lady ate with difficulty and slept not at all. Nor could she lie down without an immediate sense of suffocation.

Sitting up on an air-cushion, her withered spine propped against six pillows, she spent her nights in a sort of vague daze, seeing on the curtain of the dark a ceaseless succession of bridge-hands.

Yet this last evening of her life, though she had been semi-comatose for twelve hours, she suddenly remembered an important matter that had to be attended to at once, something she must do before she died. By the fact that this matter had become imperatively urgent Madame de La Monnerie knew that she was on the point of death.

Regaining that tone of authority which had been hers throughout her life, she demanded that the priest be sent for and her grandchildren summoned.

"You had the priest this morning," they said, speaking slowly and close to her ear.

Madame de La Monnerie opened her eyes wider.

"Oh, good!" she said. "Then my grandchildren only."

She thought: "I certainly didn't tell the priest. Was I wrong? No, clearly not, since it is not a question of my own sins..."

And she relapsed into a torpor in which were mingled feverish exhaustion, old tragedies, her appearance before the divine tribunal, and making game in spades.

Jean-Noël and Marie-Ange entered with the cautious hesitancy appropriate to the rooms of the dying. Madame de La Monnerie did not stir. The nun on duty made a sign with her head signifying: "She's no worse; she's resting."

The bedside lamp cast a weak light over the room, which was furnished in the style of Louis XVI. The bridge-table, with its markers and two packs of cards, had been pushed into a corner. On another table, at the end of the room, were the pots of paint and the coloured

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papers, now faded and dusty, that Madame de La Monnerie had used in the old days for decorating her bread dolls. She had abandoned this hobby many years ago, but would never agree to part with her materials.

For several minutes the two young people gazed at their grandmother as she sat upright among her pillows. Her shoulders were as thin as a child's beneath her crumpled nightdress. Her eyes were closed and her half-open mouth produced a short whistling sound at every breath she took. Above her drawn and withered face, now tinged with the purple beginnings of asphyxia, her abundant white hair crowned her like a too-large hat.

Jean-Noël and Marie-Ange felt the anxious disquiet that is the instinctive reaction to the spectacle of death. But although they thought, "It's Grandmother who's dying . . . Grandmother . . ." and told themselves that it was this exhausted gasping body that had once given birth to their own mother who, in her turn, had given birth to them, they were able to feel no sorrow. A sort of transparent but insurmountable screen separated their lives from the dying woman who no longer even resembled their childhood memories of her.

Madame de La Monnerie raised her eyelids and saw the two young people. How long had they been there? Had they only just come in?

They appeared to her like a wonderful vision as they stood at the foot of her bed, Marie-Ange in her white dress, Jean-Noël in his black coat. Through the mists of death they seemed to her a young and princely couple affianced to happiness.

"They are my grandchildren . . . my grandchildren . . ." the dying woman thought.

"Have you come from the ball?" she asked.

"Yes, Granny," replied Marie-Ange.

And she forced herself to go up to the bed to kiss her grandmother, while she thought (and reproached herself for thinking it): "Tomorrow I probably shan't need to conceal from her how I have spent my day."

The old woman put out a hand and stopped her.

"No, no, you mustn't kiss me, I'm too ill, it's not good for you."

Then she repeated: "You've come from the ball . . ."

They were her grandchildren and yet they seemed to her strangely distant, as if they existed outside time. The same screen, the same transparent wall divided her from them. They were like her father and mother ready to go out to dinner, they were like herself and her husband, Jean de La Monnerie, gazing at themselves in a looking-glass before going to a party, they were like her daughter Jacqueline and her son-in-law François . . . They were youth incarnate, never-ending youth, beautiful, dancing youth, youth ever renewing and perpetuating itself, endlessly the same.

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"Why aren't you at the ball?" Madame de La Monnerie asked.

Jean-Noël looked at his sister.

"You sent for us, Granny," she replied.

Madame de La Monnerie did not hear the answer; but she came out of her torpor.

Her eyes grew brighter.

"Ah, there you are," she said; "I must talk to you."

The obsession with the secret she had to reveal had returned. She slightly eased her spine, which hurt her, moved her hand, and turned her head towards the nun on duty.

"Go away for a moment," she said.

Even though her voice was very weak, she had regained her authority. The nun went out.

For a few seconds more Madame de La Monnerie gazed at the young people, wondering suddenly whether what she was going to tell them had really happened; she felt she was pursuing a dream begun some previous night.

"There are two things I have to tell you," she said. "The first, which many people know, though it has been concealed from you, is that your father committed suicide. Yes, I know that you have been told it was an accident. He shot himself in the head."

For a moment Jean-Noël wondered whose hand it was touching the back of his neck. Then he realized that he had raised his own to that sensitive spot.

"The second, which nobody knows, except the huntsman Laverdure and myself . . ." the dying woman went on.

The room smelt atrociously of medicines. At least this was the only external fact of which Jean-Noël and Marie-Ange were at that moment aware.

"The second thing," went on Madame de La Monnerie, "is that your mother was murdered by her second husband, your stepfather, De Voos. He was drunk and jealous. Colonial hysteria. Laverdure was splendid. He spared us a scandal. You must always be grateful to him. I wanted you to know in case that adventurer De Voos should ever reappear. There, now you know. I have waited as long as I could before telling you. Never repeat this to anybody. These are family secrets."

For the two young people the air no longer even smelt of medicines. The presence of death in the room seemed to have robbed the atmosphere of its vital sustenance.

Jean-Noël and Marie-Ange looked at each other and were astonished at each other's pallor. And yet they had no sensation of suffering. Marie-Ange's delicate nostrils had become quite translucent.

"I hope Marie-Ange is not going to faint," Jean-Noël thought, and put out his hand to clasp his sister's. There were immediate questions

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they wanted to ask but did not know how to put them to a dying woman.

Madame de La Monnerie did not feel the release to which she had looked forward. On the contrary, the sense of oppression was increased by the effort she had made. It was not the weight of the secrets that had caused her such agonizing pain. She had to make up her mind to accept the fact that she was dying.

"Since it's got to be, since it's going to be now . . . dear God, help me not to cry out," she prayed.

And the children heard clearly her murmur: "Dear God, help me to die decently."

She felt terror enveloping her like a black sheet.

"Go away, children, go away now," she said with difficulty. "May God bless you. We shall all meet again up above."

An uncontrollable trembling had seized her limbs.

"At least I shall have closed my eyes on something beautiful," she murmured again. "Go away, I beg you."

"Good night, Granny; sleep well," Jean-Noël said gravely, knowing that the night was eternity.

The dying woman signed with her hand, indicating once again that they should leave her. She wished to hide her death as if it were something shameful, as she had concealed physical functions all her life.

Jean-Noël and Marie-Ange obeyed and went to the door.

They did not look round. The last sight she had of them was of their backs, Marie-Ange's beautiful bare shoulders, Jean-Noël's fair and slender neck. They were going to meet their future. She did not wait for the door to close, that door which had known her comings and goings through so many years. She lowered her eyelids, determined to look on no other face in this world, until the great terror should have come to an end.

VII

In the ground-floor drawing-room the players in the "grand tournament" were waiting. They were like three old animals lost in a forest of chairs. They had not had their bridge that day. They stayed there, looking on themselves as members of the family, and making vague excuses for their presence. "If poor Juliette asks to see us . . . If there is anything we can do . . ." And every twenty minutes the retired lawyer discreetly left the room.

Isabelle Meignerais, Madame de La Monnerie's niece, did not know how to get rid of them. Short and too thick-set, her hair streaked with silver at the temples, she walked up and down the room with an anxious expression, ceaselessly putting on and taking off her glasses. From time to time she offered the old people orangeade.

"Aunt Isabelle," as Jean-Noël and Marie-Ange called her, had

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grown stouter as she entered her fifties, and no treatment or dieting could alter this. She looked as if she were bursting out of the corsets that were tight about her hips; her dress was taut across her bosom. The change of life had aggravated her innate indecisiveness. At the moment she was thinking of the announcement of the death and regretting Madame Polant, who had always been so useful in organizing funerals, without realizing that it was she herself who was now replacing "poor Polant" and that she had nothing else to do with her life.

Jean-Noël and Marie-Ange came into the drawing-room. The faces all turned towards them.

"Well?" the old Vicomtesse de Laubrières asked in a low voice.

Jean-Noël slightly shrugged his shoulders and spread out his fine, slender hands, but said nothing. Marie-Ange was automatically scaling the natural-coloured varnish from her thumb, never taking her eyes from her brother.

The three old people exchanged glances which meant: "Poor children; they've had a shock. It's a terrible time for them."

"Would you like some orangeade or something to eat?" Isabelle asked.

"No thank you, Aunt Isabelle," said Marie-Ange. "Not me, anyway."

Jean-Noël shook his head.

"Our father committed suicide . . . Our mother was murdered . . ." they were repeating to themselves. "And we have lived all these years without knowing it."

It was not enough that they had been ruined. It was not enough that they were orphans, there had to be these tragedies too, the sort of tragedies that happened only to other people, people one did not know. It was as if some terrible hereditary disease had been revealed to them.

Memories came suddenly pressing about them: the far-distant memory of their father's funeral and the deep hostile silence of the house in the Avenue de Messine. "Why is Daddy dead, Miss Mabel?" "An accident, an appalling accident, children. You must be very good. The grown-ups are very sad." And then the nearer memory of Christmas holidays in the mountains with Aunt Isabelle and the telegram announcing their mother's death. The broken balcony on the façade of Mauglaives. "That is where Madame la Comtesse fell. A tragic accident."

"He was drunk, he was jealous . . ." What reason had De Voos to be jealous of their mother? The children could remember no man hanging round her. For them she had always been a fragile, luminous figure, the very image of rectitude, of happy piety, and the object of their veneration. Was it imaginable that she had behaved like so many

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other women, like nearly all other women, who, nevertheless, did not get killed as a result?

Or was it merely the fault of that choleric man, whom they had never loved, towards whom they had always felt an instinctive hostility? If he were guilty, why had he not been arrested and brought to trial? And how had the murderer had the face to live with them for nearly two years after his crime, pretending to see to their education and manage their affairs?

And Jean-Noël suddenly remembered that he was wearing the man's coat. Oh, no! That was too much! He got suddenly to his feet, met the glances of the old people and sat down again.

The words of a servant, heard during his mother's funeral, came back to his mind: "Monsieur le Comte came back from Paris that night wearing a tail-coat . . ." Jean-Noël wondered if it were the very coat he had on this evening.

He decided to go to Africa, find Gabriel De Voos, make him confess, have him arrested or kill him with his own hands.

And Jean-Noël knew at once that he would do nothing of the sort, that this was but a last childish imagining, a melodramatic rôle such as one invents for oneself at the age of eleven, saying, "When I'm grown up!" And now he was grown up, and he would stay here, his legs crossed, sitting in this Louis XIII chair, maintaining that outward appearance of calm, detachment and reserve which by precept and example he had been inculcated with since his birth. Don't show your feelings, always preserve your dignity and your self-control. "People of our sort wear a mask, people of our sort die behind their mask, commit suicide, assassinate each other, but don't mention it to anyone, certainly not to the children. People of our sort sometimes feel as if they were going mad. But one stays put, sitting in a dreary drawing-room among a few old people, waiting for one's grandmother to die, holding the *Figaro* in one's hand, and waving one's foot to and fro."

Jean-Noël wondered where he had picked up the paper that he was not reading. He suddenly crumpled it and threw it on the floor. The old people looked questioningly at each other but said nothing.

"Really, the whole thing's absurd," Jean-Noël thought. He felt suddenly angry with fate. He and his sister had been born into the circle and tradition of wealth; they had been the most fortunate infants in Paris, they had been brought up to an enormous inheritance and to take their place in the world of luxury and power; and now they found themselves, at the very moment they were beginning to live, without parents, without a family, without support and without money; their whole fortune an uninhabitable historic château, whose roof let in the rain, and the few furnishings and pictures in the Rue de Lübeck, which they would have to sell in a hurry, as soon as the old woman had been buried, merely to feed themselves.

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"If God wanted us to be poor, he should have arranged that we were born poor; it would have been easier."

Jean-Noël, who had not thought of God for years, now suddenly began hating Him, because he could find no one else responsible for his circumstances. He hated everything round him too, the drawing-room, the old people, and death drawing near upstairs; the presence of death was becoming more intolerable to him every moment.

"Do either of you know where the last announcements are, those for Uncle Urbain and Aunt Valleroy?"

It was Aunt Isabelle asking the young people. Jean-Noël looked at her without answering, then suddenly rose to his feet and left the room. Marie-Ange joined him in the hall.

"Jean-Noël! What's the matter?" she asked.

"I can't bear it, I simply can't bear it any more. I must get away for a bit."

"I'll come with you."

"No, I'd rather be alone," he said.

Marie-Ange put her arms round her brother's neck and bent her head against his shirt-front.

"I'm unhappy too, you know," she said.

Then, raising her head, she asked: "You're going to Inès, aren't you?"

He blushed and tried to break away from her.

"I shall just go and come away again, I promise you," he said, trying to keep his voice steady. "There was something I meant to tell her."

"Can't you telephone?"

He blushed deeper still and did not answer. He would have liked to explain things to her but could find no words.

Marie-Ange looked at him.

"Go on, Jean, go to her," she said, "since it's her you need."

She lowered her eyes, and her expression suddenly seemed harsh, but it was only a contraction of the muscles against tears.

"Your scarf," she said, handing him a white muffler.

"I shall be back very soon," he murmured.

She seized his wrist.

"All the same, Jean-Noël, don't tell her."

"You must be mad," he cried.

"As if he were capable of hiding anything from her, as if he were not going there simply to tell her," Marie-Ange thought, as she turned away.

She opened the drawing-room door again.

"Aunt Isabelle," she said, "if you want me, I shall be in my room."

"And your brother?"

At that moment they heard the front door bang.

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Marie-Ange made no reply and went upstairs, her eyes filled with tears, thinking: "He's not alone, he's not alone, he's not all alone . . ."

Among their forest of chairs the old people of the "grand tournament" looked at each other in disapproval.

"We all know what boys of twenty are like," said old Madame de Laubrières at last; "all the same, on the night of his grandmother's death the boy should have stayed. If only for your sake, my dear Isabelle, don't you think so?"

Isabelle shrugged her round shoulders helplessly.

"The younger generation are certainly lacking in heart," declared the other old lady, tapping her enormous bosom with her finger.

Isabelle was tempted to agree. And then she remembered the death of Jean de La Monnerie, and how Aunt Juliette, that night, had refused to go and see her dying husband, though he was asking for her, and had merely gone on making her bread-dolls.

"If you're feeling tired, please don't . . ." said Isabelle, who was wondering when the three old people would make up their minds to go.

"Not at all, we shall not leave you alone, my dear; we know too well what it is," replied Madame de Laubrières.

The unaccustomed vigil was something of a treat for the old people in spite of the tragic circumstances.

There was a silence.

"Do you play bridge, Isabelle," asked the retired lawyer, wiping a tear from his eye-glass.

"A little, from time to time," Isabelle replied.

"Well, supposing we had a game," Madame de Laubrières suggested gently. "It would do you good, my dear, and the time would pass more quickly."

"Yes, it would prevent your thinking," said the other old woman.

Isabelle hesitated, took off her glasses, put them on again, pushed back a greying lock that had strayed across her forehead. Her brow was lined; she was mentally composing the announcement.

The three old people sat motionless, waiting; a little vitality had returned to their faces; they were watching their junior like birds of prey.

"Yes, why not, let's play a game . . ." Isabelle said automatically.

"Aunt Isabelle" sat down and began shuffling a pack. Without knowing it she had entered old age.

VIII

The greatest insomniacs in Paris had taken up their quarters at Inès Sandoval's like soldiers bivouacking. There were still some fifteen of them finishing off the food, helping themselves to champagne, and postponing for as long as possible the moment when they would have

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to face their fatigue, their solitude and their anxieties. To wait for dawn, to go to sleep in the raw light of early morning, at the hour when the great majority of human beings are getting up and going to work, these were essential to them, part of the necessities of their nature.

Masks were scattered all over the furniture. The ball was dead.

All intimate friends, they were talking over the party, at which everyone had seen everyone, no one had listened to anyone and everyone had tried to make an epigram, hoping that it would be repeated in drawing-rooms for the next week. They were discussing the clothes, who had come with whom, and who had left with whom.

The windows had been closed against the chill of the night. Auguérenc, the composer, expansive behind the folds of his stomach, had refused to sit down to the piano, but was enjoying himself eating sweets and making mischievous remarks.

The Duchesse de Salvimonte was drunk and saying to Inès: "Really, darling, Pemrose was paying his addresses to your little friend in the most horrible way."

"Was he indeed? And was he the only one, Lydia?" Inès replied.

Edouard Wilner had drawn the tall, pale, pretty and ingenuous Madame Boitel to a sofa and was lengthily kneading her hand.

"My dear friend," he said in a hoarse murmur, "you must help me die."

"But you've been saying that for five years, Edouard," she replied.

"Yes, but now it's coming true."

Simon Lachaume had been wanting to leave for the last two hours; but he stayed because of Sylvaine who, merely to exasperate him, obstinately refused to go, pretending to be interested in the conversation of the Peruvian diplomat, with his insipid good looks, oily hair, luminous smile and flaccid cheeks.

"And," thought Simon, "it's probably all because the fool wants to get something out of me and thinks that by paying court to Sylvaine..."

He despised himself for wasting his time like this.

"I've got a terrible day tomorrow. I shall be dead-tired and there's my speech to prepare for the party congress. Well, she can get the fool with his white teeth to take her home and she can go to bed with him if she wants to, I don't care a damn; there are more important things in life..." And yet he stayed on knowing that he and Sylvaine would go home together as usual and have a more violent, more atrocious, more sordid and more ridiculous scene than ever; and that it would end in his smacking her face and the tears without which they could scarcely now go to bed.

"I no longer love her, but I'm jealous. The sequel to passion is more pernicious than the disease itself."

And he listened to Lartois developing his favourite paradox about the Roman decadence.

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"Our age of the Antonines, my dear fellow, came to an end in 1914, and our Marcus Aurelius was called Armand Fallières . . ."

Some guests, on leaving, had left the front door open. Jean-Noël had no need to ring. He crossed the hall with the parakeets, heard voices in the drawing-room, went to the curtains and saw the assembled company through the fringed divide and the clouds of blue smoke that hung about them. He lacked the courage to go in. What could he say? What reason could he give for his return? "I have no right to compromise her," he thought. Inès was laughing and pouring out champagne.

Jean-Noël stood there for a moment, hoping against hope that some telepathic communication would make his presence known to her. She *must* feel that he was there. "Come, Inès, come," he prayed.

But she failed to hear his secret summons, and moved away to the farther end of the drawing-room.

Jean-Noël left the curtain and went down the passage to Inès's room.

"I'll wait for her here," he thought; "they won't stay on indefinitely."

A silver lamp on a low table cast a dim light over the contrived disorder of jade cups, icons, ivory paper-knives and rich modern bindings. Here all sound was deadened by dark-brown velvet. The huge, low bed was concealed under an enormous chinchilla coverlet, whose silver sheen glowed provocatively among the brown shadows. A bunch of tuberose exhaled a heavy, heady scent. In a corner of the room stood a little ebony and mother-of-pearl desk; it was so low that Inès was accustomed to write at it on her knees, as if adopting an attitude of prayer before her own genius. Sometimes, when Jean-Noël had been there, he had seen her go to the little desk and cover a sheet of rice-paper, thick as an invitation card, with her enormous writing, while he lay silent and naked on the bed.

"I shall never, never forget this room," he often thought. "No other room in the world can hold so much happiness for me."

And tonight, more than ever, he felt that this room was his only asylum, his only shelter.

Jean-Noël threw himself on the fur coverlet and buried his face in the pillows. The orange-coloured silk of the pillow-case was impregnated with the smell of Inès, a dark, musky, heavy odour. And Jean-Noël began crying into the silk, into the scent, because his nerves were stretched to breaking-point.

"When will she come," he wondered, "when will these people go? I ought not to cry, I ought not to show myself to her in this state."

He gave way to self-pity and let his tears flow on to the pillow-case.

Suddenly he heard footsteps, Inès's footsteps, and sat up, his tears over, the weight in his breast already half-relieved.

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The footsteps went into the neighbouring bathroom and other steps followed behind them. He heard a man's footfall on the mosaic floor. There was whispering.

Jean-Noël wiped his eyes and held his breath. He heard stifled laughter through the communicating door; there were two or three people with Inès. Jean-Noël's first thought was a well-bred reaction to go away, to leave on tiptoe by the passage. He felt embarrassed, as if he had opened in mistake a letter addressed to someone else.

Suddenly he heard Ines's voice saying distinctly: "So I can't even powder my nose in peace?"

"But, darling, we wanted to congratulate you from the bottom of our hearts, and God knows how deep our hearts are . . ."

Jean-Noël recognized the hoarse, cavernous, rather breathless voice as Edouard Wilner's; then he heard the precise, whistling voice of Lartois say: "Yes, your new knave of hearts is charming, slender, graceful, elegant . . ."

"He's a treasure," Inès replied.

"We don't doubt it," Lartois went on. "We were talking about him a little while ago and saying—weren't we Simon?—'Inès always has decidedly good taste,' which was a way of rendering implicit homage to ourselves . . ."

"And does he make love well? Does a boy of that age make love well?" Wilner asked.

"One day he'll make love wonderfully, superbly," Inès said.

"Yes, indeed, the stammerings of genius are more moving than genius itself," said the third voice. "And when he's passed through your hands, Inès . . ."

"And particularly your mouth," Wilner added. "Oh, that mouth, how much happiness it has spread around it! It counts among the good memories of life . . ."

There was more laughter, and then their voices sank and he could not catch what they were saying. There was the sound of a slap on someone's hand and Inès said: "Don't be idiotic, Edouard!"

"Do you mean to say you're faithful to him into the bargain?" said the old ogre's voice.

"I've never been faithful to anyone but myself, my treasures."

Jean-Noël did not weep. He stood aghast, his cheeks crimson, his heart constricted.

So Lartois, Wilner and the other, the Minister Simon Lachaume, had all been Inès's lovers.

She had never said a word of it to him, never given him an inkling. Speaking of them she said: "They're very old friends." So that was what "old friends" meant?

He began adding things up: two husbands, the young poet who had committed suicide, the three men in the bathroom, and how many

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more were there? There seemed no reason to stop there. What was his number, "the new knave of hearts," at the bottom of the list?

And Inès had given these men the same caresses, the same pleasures—to Lachaume, with his ugliness, his big frog-like head and his glasses—and they all spoke of these things to each other, openly, cynically, while he, Jean-Noël, did his best to conceal his love, constantly afraid of compromising Inès, even concerned that his sister should know of it!

Nor could he bring himself to admit that Inès could have been the mistress of men who were now over seventy. It seemed to him revolting and unnatural! Wilner, Lartois; those two famous men whom he had admired since childhood, whom he had revered and identified with their fame, how could they be these two lewd old men leaning against a wash-basin, stretching out senile hands to Inès's dress, her corsage?

And how could she bear to talk of him before them, with them, discuss his person, his body, his feelings as if it were a question of the points of a three-year-old horse, the qualities of a new car or the charm of some fluffy toy? How could she bear to mingle all these memories in that very bathroom where these men had washed and dressed before him?

The extraordinary indecencies of old men, indeed of mature men, shocked the boy for the first time and opened an undeserved wound in his mind. He did not know whether to fly, for ever ashamed, or whether to throw open the door, shout at them, insult them, manifest the courage of his disgust.

As he moved across the room, he knocked over an ashtray, which fell to the carpet with a dull thud.

The voices in the bathroom fell silent. Then Inès said: "I don't know; it must be the housemaid turning down my bed. I thought she had gone long ago. Go away, go all three of you."

He heard the men moving off. A door shut. Then the door of the room opened and Inès appeared.

"Oh, it's you?" she cried. "What are you doing here? What a state you're in."

He stood before her, his hair tousled, his face still wet with tears, and his coat covered with chinchilla hairs. He looked at her strangely.

"I was waiting for you," he said.

"What? What's the matter? What's happened? Tell me, darling."

Jean-Noël went on staring at her. He hesitated before speaking. Then he said suddenly, but in no tone of avowal, abandon or of seeking comfort, but in one of reproach, as if she must be overwhelmed with shame at hearing of it: "I have just learned that my father committed suicide."

Inès's expression was neither one of sorrow nor compassion, but a flicker of plain surprise.

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"Didn't you know?" she said. "Everybody knows. I remember when it happened very well. It was some Stock Exchange business, I think, between him and his father. Didn't anyone ever tell you? I don't know why people keep these things from children. Is that why you've got yourself into this state? It's too absurd, my little stag! It makes no difference to life."

It was Jean-Noël's turn to be surprised. How incredible that this woman, who had created for herself a legendary reputation for sensibility, who could mourn a canary's broken leg for hours, who had written of herself as "a lute vibrating to all the sorrows of the world," should find nothing more to say to him than this.

The lute failed to vibrate. The word suicide evoked for Inès only the memory—the subject of tear-bedewed and, taken all in all, rather satisfactory elegies—of the young writer who had killed himself on her behalf. "Thanks to him I probably wrote my best book," she told herself from time to time.

"And then my mother, my mother . . ." said Jean-Noël, sobs rising in his throat.

"What about your mother?"

"Nothing . . ." said Jean-Noël shaking his head.

They had been suddenly cut off from the blessings, the incalculable blessings of shared confidence and absolute mutual frankness. She had become a stranger again. He could imagine all too easily how, if he told her his secrets, she would at once display them, as if they were some merchandise, before her past lovers, before the council of the old men.

"No, nothing," he repeated.

"You ought to go home, darling," Inès said. "You're tired and hysterical. Things'll look better in the morning. Shall I give you a sleeping-pill to take when you go to bed? Remember, I shall be thinking of you all the time. Telephone me tomorrow, in a few hours' time, as early as you like. Eleven o'clock, if you like. Now go, please. I can't leave my guests any longer."

Was that all she had to offer him? A sleeping-pill, a telephone call, her guests . . .

"Yes of course," said Jean-Noël angrily. "Go back to Lartois, Wilner . . ."

She realized that he had overheard the conversation in the bathroom.

"Oh, Émile and Edouard, you know . . ."

She made a gesture signifying that none of it had any importance.

" . . . they're like brothers to me!"

"Well then, stay with your family," said Jean-Noël.

"Really," she said, "you're not going to start being jealous of the past now, particularly of that past. How young you are! Besides, I've

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hidden nothing from you. It's you who've never asked. I thought you knew."

Jean-Noël uttered his first lewd phrase, his first male insult.

"How could I tell," he said, "that you knew every cock in your drawing-room by heart?"

And the blood flowed to his face at having dared say it, and he waited for her to slap him.

A violet light shone in Inès's dark eyes.

"My dear child," she said, "don't try to be stupidly insulting."

Her face had an odd expression of mock concern, almost of pleasure.

"It's you I love, you know that, you enchanting young idiot," she added.

She went close to him and held her mouth up to him.

But for Jean-Noël her mouth was now encumbered with too many known presences.

He turned on his heel and went out without another word.

He went down the silent passage, through the hall with its aviary, hearing laughter and voices, among them the breathless voice of the dramatist, beyond the hangings. Jean-Noël closed the front door behind him, making as little noise as possible.

Suddenly, on the stairs, he clutched the banisters. He felt a diffused, incomprehensible, appalling agony. His love was hurting him, rather as a man who has been amputated feels pain in the limb that has been cut off.

IX

The streets were deserted. There were few taxis, and in each of them two heads could be seen close together through the back window. Day was about to break. Rag-pickers were already working through the dustbins.

Jean-Noël had no idea where he was going. He was adrift in Paris like a piece of flotsam in the river. He merely wandered on, unconscious of his route.

Behind him was Inès's house; a dead house. In front of him, over towards the Trocadero, was the house in the Rue de Lübeck in which Madame de La Monnerie must by now be no more than a corpse. There was no house at which he might knock and go in. The street-lamps shone in the silence.

The pavement echoed his lonely footsteps. Jean-Noël felt as if he were walking through a dead world. He was alone, and for all eternity. He could no longer trust his senses.

He felt his arms and his forehead; but his nerves, frayed by emotion, sorrow and lack of sleep, no longer responded. His flesh refused to yield him a sensation of life. He no longer had a thorax, no longer a skeleton,

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he was no more than a great cold void, conforming vaguely to the mould of his clothes, and imbued only with a general fury against a universe that lacked all seriousness and precision.

He ran to a big chestnut tree, hammered the rough bark with his fists, chafing his hands, bruising his shoulder, felt reassured by the pain and hammered the tree again. So true it is that the exterior world exists and reassures us only to the extent that we find it an obstacle.

Jean-Noël breathed more freely. The tree was a living proof. And because the tree existed, everything else must exist. So his father had committed suicide, his mother had been murdered, and Inès had slept with the whole town; and he had to accept these things or follow his father's example. For suicide and madness are the only ways of refusing to accept life. And madness is not within everyone's reach. Exhausted, Jean-Noël clung to the thick dark trunk.

From the shadows behind the tree two women suddenly appeared and stared at the young man for several seconds. Their skirts were too short, stretched taut about their hips, their stockings were too light in colour, the heels of their shoes too high, and they carried shiny bags in their hands. Jean-Noël saw them and suddenly burst out laughing.

They took him for a young man going home from a party rather drunk.

"What's the matter? Are you feeling ill? Have you drunk too much?" one of them asked.

He laughed all the more.

"Are you laughing at us? What's so funny about us?" the second one asked.

"Nothing, nothing; it's not because of you. It's because . . . because of nothing," said Jean-Noël, calming down.

"You're drunk, darling, stinking," said the first one.

Her voice was hoarse and provocative. Jean-Noël looked at her more closely. Her hair was bleached to a pale, false brassiness, her face was hollow, split by a large, violently coloured mouth, and she was wearing a silver-fox-fur round her shoulders. The other girl was dumpier and, beneath her waved, lack-lustre hair, she looked like a *petite bourgeoise*.

Jean-Noël gazed round him to see where he was. He was in the Champs Elysées, by the gardens, and the street-lamps were shining on the foliage of the trees.

"What are you doing, darling? You're surely not going home all alone?" said the girl with the fox-fur. "We were just going home ourselves. Don't you want to come and make love?"

Make love. "Does he make love well? . . . One day he'll make love wonderfully, superbly . . . When he's passed through your hands . . . And your mouth . . ." Make love. The very words Lachaume, Lartois and Inès had used.

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"If you'd like to, we'll have great fun, the three of us. Because I and my girl-friend, you know, we always stick together. We're just a couple of dirty sluts, you see . . ."

She put her hollow face close to Jean-Noël's, opened her hidden lips on long, widely spaced teeth and clamped her jaws together. She might have been twenty-five at the most, and looked like death helmeted for a torchlight tattoo.

"We'll have lots of fun, the three of us."

The three of us, the four of us: Inès, Wilner, Lartois and Lachaume in the bathroom.

The dumpy one, with the face of a *petite bourgeoise* made a sign to the other with her head as if to say: "Come on, we're wasting our time! He won't make up his mind."

Jean-Noël went on staring at them.

"How much?" he asked, and as he said it he heard a buzzing in his ears.

And he thought of Marie-Ange to whom he had promised to return quickly, of Marie-Ange who must be imagining him—how absurd it was!—calmed and consoled in Inès's arms, of Marie-Ange who was the only being whom he could really betray, of Marie-Ange who also had flesh and bone and a heart to suffer similar sorrows. There was still time to go back to her, to the only person he loved, both to bring and find relief.

The two prostitutes discussed the matter.

"A hundred francs each," said the one with the brassy hair, "because you're a nice boy and we like you, don't we, Minnie?"

The dumpy one approved.

Jean-Noël laughed, thinking that it was just about what the flowers he would have sent Inès next day would have cost him. It was this that decided him.

There was a mirror in the ceiling. Jean-Noël could not have said by what streets the two prostitutes had led him from the Rond Point to this room which smelt unaired, of bad face cream, cheap scent and stale sins.

A sleepy night-waiter, wearing a shirt without a collar, brought towels and a minute piece of soap.

"Aren't you thirsty, darling? I'm thirsty," said the blonde girl with the corpse-like face.

And the sleepy waiter, dragging his feet, came upstairs again with undrinkable brandy in little goblets that had lost their plating, of the kind one sees in rows of six on the dressers of concierges' lodges.

And Jean-Noël paid the waiter, and he paid the girls, who wanted their "present" beforehand. "It's nicer like that; we shan't have to mention it again."

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"It's not every day we get a fellow in tails," said the blonde. "You're very handsome, you know."

Then, suddenly seeing the hairs from the fur on Jean-Noël's clothes, she said: "Lord, I hope it's not my fox moulting?"

She took one of the silver hairs, raising it to the light.

"No, it's all right, it's not the same," she said. "Have you been making love on fur this evening? You don't want to tell? Oh, I'm not curious, you know . . ."

And the two girls took off their clothes, and displayed their bodies with indifference to their unknown customer's gaze, for their hundred francs apiece. They merely retained their shoes and their silk stockings rolled down over the ankles.

And now De Voos's coat, the re-tailored coat of Jacqueline's murderer, lay on a chair in a sordid hotel, its tails trailing on the threadbare carpet looking vaguely like a disjointed body that has been knifed.

And now Jean-Noël was lying naked in the middle of the bed between the two prostitutes, his eyes fixed on the ceiling.

"We brought you here," said the girl who called herself Minnie, "because it's the only place where there are mirrors like that. And when there are three of you, it's nicer."

She was ill-made, short-thighed, with large, clotted buttocks. The one with the brassy hair had had a Caesarean, and Jean-Noël could see, reflected on the ceiling, the long scar dividing her thin stomach. She had pointed hip-bones, loose, shapeless breasts, and her livid skin was marked with greenish bruises; she looked more and more like a corpse.

Moreover, seen in those inverted depths, they looked all three like dead bodies, suddenly and monstrously animated, at the bottom of a crypt; or, again, like three corpses buried in a common grave, whose gravestone had been raised at the instant of the resurrection of the flesh that it might be consigned to Hell and its eternal damnation accomplished.

Jean-Noël stared at this tangle of necks, legs, locks and pubic hair, of which his own long, pale body, infinitely more beautiful than those of the two women, was the centre and the pretext. They were like two demons, seizing on an angel to drag him down in a fall that would have no end. And the pale angel watched his own hands feeling and kneading these bodies that were hired out for every depravity, whose function was to provide him that evening with a strange vengeance of which he was both the protagonist and the victim.

Jean-Noël made no reply to the two girls' obscene suggestions. He had no desires. He was content to follow on the ceiling the ritual of this Black Mass of love, and to regain a certain objectivity. He refused to allow the girls' mouths to approach his face; but he handed over the

rest of his body to them with a mixture of detachment, horror and joy—the satisfaction of the horrible. He was surprised that at the contact of their hands and lips, the same desires should be awakened in him, the same excitement of the nerves, as at the caresses of Inès.

"Why are you in this business?" he heard himself saying to the two creatures who, in the mirror above, had fastened themselves on his central image like two leeches.

He immediately wondered why he had made such a ridiculous remark. "For a hundred francs," they would say.

The head of the *petite bourgeoise* seemed to emerge from the ceiling, to hang, neck downwards, out of the mirror.

"Because I like it," she said in a tone of conviction.

"The worst of it is, that what she says is true," said the one with the corpse-like head, detaching herself in her turn and shaking her yellow metal serpents. "And to-night she's enjoying herself. It's not the same with me . . . I've had it; and this'll put a quicker end to things . . . And what about you," she asked Jean-Noël, "with your looks, and rich into the bargain, you can't lack for women. Don't you think it's vicious to come and do it here with us?"

The voices resounded on a level with his ears, while their mouths seemed to be opening three yards away. The dimensions of the world had altered.

And suddenly Jean-Noël saw himself pull the long body with the Caesarean scar on top of him.

"You see, I told you it was you he wanted," said Minnie with a sort of professional resentment.

Jean-Noël's sight seemed to waver. In the dim mirror it was no longer the thin girl's buttocks or the short arms of the other prostitute that seemed to be falling towards him; Inès had suddenly appeared up there with her stockings rolled down over her shoes; Inès was in the mirror with Lartois, with Wilner, Inès split into two, avid, hideous, lying in the arms of successive partners. And Jean-Noël saw his grandfather, the terrifying Noël Schoudler with his bearded chin; and he saw his mother, he saw her twice, placed beside herself as it were, and beneath one of his mother's bodies was his father, and beneath the other was her second husband, the murderer; and up above there was also old Madame de La Monnerie dying, and she too had had children and, like the others, had received the seed. The living and the dead, the family, dreams, poetry and fame, jostled each other and fused only to become, at one stroke, mired and sullied. Every convulsive movement of the thin girl raised a new presence; every movement of either of them, every gesture of their limbs raised new accomplices. Marthe Bonnefoy and the Salvimonte, Lachaume and Auguérenc, all the people who had been at Inès ball now entered the mirror, with their monstrous heads and naked bodies; and following them, emerging from the depths

of his memory, came the ragged crowd from the door in the Avenue de Messine, with his great-grandfather Siegfried distributing alms, the poor, the halt, and the hungry; and, moving in an unceasing circle, they exchanged masks and faces.

The mirror had become the scene of a sort of maleficent dream, an infamous revolving fresco covering the whole ceiling of the world.

At last Jean-Noël closed his eyes.

CHAPTER TWO

Rupture

As always, Simon Lachaume had waited until the last moment to prepare his speech. Two days before, there had been a late sitting at the Luxembourg, and Simon, from the government bench, had had to hold his own against a number of elderly senators, as hirsute and as stubborn as wild boars, who were trying to find any sort of occasion to bring the Government down.

Simon crossed the room and leaned his heated forehead against the window-pane, against the night.

He had been dictating for over an hour.

Simon Lachaume's private flat was on the heights of the Trocadéro, in a new block.

Immediately beneath his windows was the Exhibition ground where the night-shifts were working by floodlight. The Minister gazed at this army of midgets behind the palisades for a long moment as they moved about in the light of a sort of Aurora Borealis, erecting flagstaffs, removing rubbish, pushing wheelbarrows, hauling on ropes, and hoisting bronze statues to their pedestals. To his left the new Trocadéro Palace—which from now on was to be called the Palais de Chaillot out of deference to Spanish susceptibilities—raised its elegant white mass while the last of the plaster was being scraped smooth and the last marbles placed in position. In the gardens the plumbers were fixing jets to the fountains and the electricians were wiring the floodlighting.

The two Pavilions of the U.S.S.R. and Hitler's Germany, built facing each other in front of the Pont d'Iéna, raised to the dark depths of the sky an architectural defiance that one could not help interpreting as a portent. There were workmen on the roofs of the other nations; beyond the river there was an ant-like activity beneath the giant legs of the Eiffel Tower; further away there was experimental lighting in the

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sham French village; and as far as the extremity of the Champs de Mars this horizontal, illusory Babel was being hastily confected of three-ply and plaster-board, so that every day five hundred thousand people might move, drink, eat, wonder, jostle each other, lose themselves, stampede, buy Carpathian dolls, Oriental incense, Montélimar nougat, and return home in long columns, dragging their feet like convicts, raising clouds of grey dust and leaflets.

Simon Lachaume thought that he might easily have been one of those workmen under the travelling lights, whom he was watching at labour on this enormous, friable task. He had been born, as they had, into the humblest class of society; his relatives were lost among these men's relatives in the enormous mass of the populace, and the destiny that might normally have been foreseen for him was that of an agricultural labourer or an artisan.

But he had become the important personage to whom the plans and the estimates for this gigantic fair had been submitted, he had had the decisive say in selecting architects and commissioning works of art, and his name would be carved on a marble tablet and affixed to some stone peristyle.

Simon Lachaume turned and saw the looking-glass above the fireplace reflecting his stocky figure, which the newspapers reproduced every morning in photograph or caricature.

He felt a sense of justice, for the clock showed almost midnight, and there he was, still working on government business, while his workmen were labouring on the Exhibition ground.

His secretary was waiting, a pencil poised in her hand, her pad on her knees. Madame Désesquelles had been Simon's private secretary for three years. She was a woman of some thirty summers, dark, faded of complexion, neither pretty nor ugly, discreet, punctual, and remarkably quick with her fingers. Her memory was faultless.

She was one of those amanuenses who fall in love with the man they work for. Simon could ask her to miss meals, stay up all night, and put her holiday off indefinitely. In her eyes Simon was a man of genius, almost God himself. She adored him in silence and contented herself, in her secret heart, with hating Sylvaine. Simon was perfectly well aware of all this.

In a moment of hunger he could have taken advantage of this woman who was so patently on offer and no more or less comestible than another. But he had never yielded to this facile temptation. He had never even stroked Madame Désesquelles's cheek with his finger. He was too aware of the advantages he derived from the unsatiated passion she lavished on him.

"I'm keeping you up late, my poor Désesquelles," he said.

"Oh no, Monsieur le Ministre, it doesn't matter at all; I've got plenty of time before the last train."

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She lived near the Pont de Boulogne.

"The last train," Simon thought. And it occurred to him that he had not been in the Métro for quite ten years. He had to make an effort to remember the warm, stale smell of the tunnel—no, at this time of the year, at night, it was stale and cool—or perhaps that depended on the line you took—no, really, he couldn't remember any more. He no longer knew anything of the crowds who each day were jolted about in the tunnels thirty feet below the wheels of his official car.

Simon thought that one of these days he really must take the Métro to see what it was like.

"If you're tired tonight, Monsieur le Ministre," she said, "I could come back and finish it off tomorrow morning, at any time you like, at seven, or six o'clock even . . ."

She had a vague hope that he might reply: "Yes, all right, I'll take a few hours' rest. And rather than go all that way home, why don't you lie down on one of the sofas . . ."

Simon thought of the next day. He had to receive the Federation of Schoolteachers, and then the Director of the Luxembourg Museum about new acquisitions; he had ten other people on his list; he had also Madame de La Monnerie's funeral, which it would be only proper for him to attend; he had to deal with the case of an Inspector of Primary Schools who had raped an Indo-Chinese girl; he had to have luncheon with the representatives of the Federation of the Cher; he had the Party Congress all afternoon and his speech to make; he had his paper work, a huge pile of papers, an hour of signing, thirty files to read, thirty letters to dictate, concerning every sort of subject: subsidies, decorations, the repair of monuments, the National Theatres, the École des Beaux Arts, the Villa Médici, archaeological missions in the Middle East, and a kindergarten at Drancy.

The trouble with us Ministers," he said, "is that we do twenty hours of administration for ten minutes of government. We no longer have time to think."

He must finish his speech tonight.

"Where had I got to?" he asked. "Give me the last sentence."

Madame Désesquelles bent over her pad and read: "From the moment it was realized that those general and, indeed, generous principles of 1919 had failed of their object . . ."

"... from the moment," Lachaume continued, "that the very idea of acquiescing in sacrifices for peace became a shroud for President Aristide Briand, from the moment that certain nations, their ruined towns rebuilt, devoted a part of their essential energies to the manufacture of new means of destruction . . ."

"... destruction . . ." repeated the secretary in a low voice without raising her head.

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"... and from the moment," went on Lachaume more slowly, "that recourse to violence was once again accepted, if not actively desired, by these nations..."

He stopped, feeling that he had reached a dead end, for his conclusion was plain before him, and it seemed impossible to formulate, impossible to utter.

"That's why my attention's wandering tonight, why I can't concentrate," he thought. "It's because I'm not sure what I want to say; or, rather, because I can't possibly say what I'm sure of."

He sat down behind his big rosewood desk, wiped his glasses with his thumbs, and twiddled a cigarette in his fingers without lighting it. For a moment his mind was a blank, like the gear of a car that will not engage. "Do I really think war is inevitable in the more or less immediate future?" he wondered.

This was the gravest question he could have to face as a member of the Government, the question on which his whole attitude towards his own conscience, his electors and towards Parliament must depend.

Simon Lachaume was Vice-President of his party; he was in a position to expect, indeed demand, one of the three great portfolios, War, Interior or Foreign Affairs, at the first ministerial reshuffle. He was already looked on as a potential Prime Minister. This speech on general policy was an implicit act of candidature for one of the posts that still remained for him to conquer.

"What a question! What a question!" he thought. "Do I really think that? If I do think it, then I must say it!"

He was afflicted by a sort of vertigo of responsibility; it happened to him rather frequently these days.

"In the old days," he thought as he began walking up and down the room again, "I never asked myself all these questions. Why am I less sure of myself? Am I growing old?"

He considered the principal stages in his Ministerial career.

"I've always been lucky," he thought, "I've always succeeded in turning every Government scrape to my own advantage: Doumer's assassination, the riots of the 6th February, the murder of Barthou and Alexander, the Stavisky affair... Since I was first elected in 1928 I've always emerged from every political accident with an enhanced position. But there comes a moment in the career of every politician when his fate is fused with that of his country and his nation. I have reached that moment. Tomorrow, or in two months' time, or in six, I shall be at the Rue Saint Dominique or the Quai d'Orsay. Then, if war is declared, I'm the assassin. If we win, I'm the conqueror. If we're defeated, I'm the Minister who's incompetent, dishonoured, banished. Well, not I alone; but I should be among the first... From now on my own future, whenever I make a speech on general policy, is welded to the future of the nation. Did I foresee that I should have

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to face such appalling decisions when I was ambitious to become a Minister?"

It was now no longer a matter of conducting his private adventure, of turning ministerial crises, assassinations, abortive revolutions or financial scandals to his own advantage.

It was a matter of working hand in glove with history. And Simon was clearly aware of how history was evolving, how it was taking shape about the nation and the empire while he was still ambitiously building his own career. He saw the tomorrows it presaged.

And current history was the Chinese marshals on the other side of the world fighting, since the death of Sun-Yat-Sen, among themselves, like Alexander's successors; it was Japan trampling on Manchuria, machine-guns rattling in the rice-fields and burning bamboo villages; it was the war in Abyssinia, a war that, suppurating like a huge black abscess on Africa's flank, had no cause but the desire to make it, and was being fought against half-naked men armed with lances, who trapped tanks as if they were rhinoceroses among the bursting bombs and shells.

Did Simon forget that he had formed part of three successive Governments one of which had opposed sanctions against Italy, the second supported them, and the third been in favour of the non-application of the sanctions voted?

And current history was the failure of the League of Nations, the resignation of the German delegation and its leaving the audience-hall in a mortal silence, and the Council of the League, more deserted every session, contenting itself with announcing timid and inoperative ex-communications.

It was the holocaust in Spain, the intervention of Germany and Italy who were seizing the opportunity, by supporting military sedition, of turning a whole country into a field for exercises directed against real objectives.

It was the iron voices at the gates of France which, from a balcony in Milan, from a stage in Nuremberg, from a tribune in a stadium, from a waggon, from an agricultural tractor, from an armoured car, from any available platform, were urging uniformed hordes to pride and violence.

It was locomotives in both the Americas being fired with wheat, the wheat of over-production, while in Asia famine killed millions of human beings every year.

It was unemployment and the manufacture of arms to absorb the unemployed, to defend living-room, to support minorities, to protect zones of commercial influence; and it was the traffic in arms across continents, by official treaty or by contraband, as if one part of humanity were incapable of existing without trafficking in the massacre of the rest.

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Wherever you looked, war was either threatened or in being, where ever you looked there was menace, experiments on explosives and improvements in engines of war.

"When nations exhaust themselves in the manufacture of arms," said Simon, thinking aloud, "they invariably nurse the absurd illusion that they will not have to use them, while it is in fact the very weight of their arms that drags them down to death."

His secretary had taken the sentence down in shorthand.

"Is that part of your speech, Monsieur le Ministre?" she asked.

He raised his head in surprise and looked at Madame Désesquelles. He was in process of composing the Opposition's speech, accusing himself to himself.

What had he, Simon, the elected of the victorious nation of 1919 ever done to oppose this war "that was never to happen again" but which, in fact, had never ceased upon the planet for an instant and whose vice was closing its jaws day by day more tightly about the country and the empire? Had he ever raised his voice in protest, had he ever warned his audience, had he ever made use of his prestige, had he ever had the courage to resign from a post and refuse to be an accomplice of disaster?

For a moment he was tempted to say all this on the morrow, to throw this bomb at the National Congress of his party. But was he to renounce, so as to relieve his conscience and relieve one conscience-stricken moment, ten years of public life? And to achieve what end, reach what conclusion? Propose what solution?

From whom could he ask counsel in his dilemma? He no longer had seniors, only rivals.

"Madame Désesquelles," he said, "what would you think of me if war were to break out?"

"I should think, Monsieur le Ministre, that you had done everything possible to prevent it," she replied.

She turned pale.

"Do you really think . . ." she asked.

"No, no, certainly not. I was merely thinking," said Simon quickly.

"What a great man," thought Madame Désesquelles, "to consider such grave matters before making a speech. The people who listen to him have no idea . . ."

And at the same time Simon was thinking: "That's the problem: either drive them to despair, or reassure them with lies . . ."

At that moment the telephone rang. Madame Désesquelles picked up the receiver.

"It's Mademoiselle Dual," she said, putting her hand over the mouthpiece.

With a gesture of impatience Simon took the receiver from her. Sylvaine's voice was making the metal diaphragm crackle.

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"Hullo, Simon, is that you, darling? A most appalling thing has happened. There's a plot against me, against you," cried Sylvaine, "to prevent my appearing at the Française and to make us both look ridiculous."

"What's going on?" Simon asked.

"My dress for the second act's impossible!"

Simon shrugged his shoulders while Sylvaine screamed confused and angry complaints about the rehearsals, the theatre dressmakers, the mentality of the management and the hatred of which she was convinced she was the object.

"No one will persuade me that there's not some underlying political plot," she cried.

"It can all be arranged quite easily: there are still six days before the dress rehearsal," he said.

Sylvaine would not see it in that light. She wanted Simon to go with her next day to choose another dress.

"But it's quite impossible, darling," Simon cried. "Now you want to make me look ridiculous! I've really got more important things to do..."

Simon had then to listen to a tirade about love. Love was the most important thing in the world! Throughout history the greatest men had given proof of it. Of course if he lacked the courage to defend the woman he loved...

"All right, we'll see about it later. I'm working with my secretary," Simon said.

"But this is a question of *my* work," Sylvaine replied, "and it's you they want to get at through me."

She sounded as if she were about to reproach him with damaging her career by the very fact of being a Minister.

Simon felt there was no way out. The presence of Madame Désesquelles prevented his letting fly with the offensive remarks he had in mind; and to cut her off suddenly would have even worse consequences. With his teeth clenched and his foot slowly tapping the carpet, he allowed the telephone for some minutes to transmit accusations, tears and prophesies of even more shattering disasters.

Sylvaine attached a superstitious importance to the selection of this dress...

"All right, all right," he said, defeated. "Tomorrow at eleven-thirty. Yes, be punctual; it's my only free half-hour. Yes, I promise. Yes, we'll dine together too... Yes, of course I love you... All right, sleep well."

He could at last replace the receiver.

Madame Désesquelles, with impassive face, suffered in silence for Simon's dignity, and Simon suffered from feeling that he was being judged.

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"All right, let's finish it off," he said, venting on his speech the irritation the incident had aroused in him. "Cross out all that last part from 'the moment when' and we'll go on."

He lit a cigarette.

"After all, after all," he thought, as he strode up and down, "it's only a speech like another, meant to show that my party has acted rightly and is placing the responsibility for the mistakes that have been committed on others. I do the best I can. I can't prevent the world going astray all by myself. And all to save whom, to save what? The little intrigues of the Théâtre Français, Inès Sandoval's dances, the paltry compositions of Auguérenc . . ."

He came to a halt in the middle of the carpet, took a deep breath, squared his shoulders, and dictated: "Undoubtedly the international horizon may look dark. But to lose hope, to exaggerate events deliberately so as to engage the country, as none of us would wish, in a path of adventure that would be profitable only to the enemies of democracy, would be a crime against the republic, against the country, against civilization itself. Citizens, the history of catastrophe avoided can never be written. If it were, I am convinced that it would bear witness in our favour. Now, more than ever, we must remain faithful to those general and, indeed, generous principles . . ."

To express, with the same words, the opposite of his true thoughts, he had adopted a slow, forceful, energetic diction—his tribune voice.

"Oh yes, this is much better!" Madame Désesquelles could not help murmuring.

" . . . but this attitude imposes the duty on us of being more than ever vigilant . . ."

Simon smacked his left fist into his right palm. This time he had his peroration. In the same tenor he concluded with an admirable exhortation to vigilance: republican vigilance in internal affairs and a common front of all the democratic parties in defence of the country's institutions; vigilance in national defence for the protection of the frontiers; and vigilance in diplomacy for the safeguarding of the peace of the world!

All of which meant quite clearly, for those who understood these things, that he was demanding, so as to exercise this vigilance, one of the three great portfolios.

Under the windows the Exhibition workmen were still soldering lead and making cement.

II

Jean-Noël put on his tail-coat again, after it had been well brushed, so as to be chief mourner at Madame de La Monnerie's funeral. This took place at Saint Honoré d'Eylau, the church in which the obsequies of the poet had once been celebrated.

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"Do you remember?" said Marie-Ange to her brother. "You made a scene that morning because I was going to the funeral and you weren't. You were too young."

By comparing that sumptuous funeral, whose candles still glowed among her childhood memories, with today's ceremony, Marie-Ange could gauge the decline and fall of the family.

No more than thirty people had taken the trouble to pay their respects to the mortal remains of the illustrious man's widow. The Mass was hurried through, as if everyone, priest, deacon, congregation and undertakers, were all eager to have done with these customs-house formalities. There was nothing of importance in the coffin.

The Swiss guard leaned on his halberd and was bored.

The young Duc de Valleroy, a man of about forty, bald, obese, and with the authoritative air of a man of affairs in a hurry, had come, not from any particular affection for his old aunt La Monnerie but merely to fulfil what he considered one of the obligations of his position. He behaved like the chief of the clan of the old France. And every year, from a similar sense of duty, he attended the anniversary Mass of the death of Louis XVI.

While the d'Huises and the La Monneries were either extinct or were becoming so, while their wealth had turned to dust, and their alliance with the Schoulders had but hastened their downfall, the Valleroy had both perpetuated themselves and maintained their position; various inheritances had increased their wealth. Charles de Valleroy (he was still called "the young Duc" from habit, because he had inherited the title when he was only just of age) possessed a dozen châteaux scattered across four provinces, thousands of acres of farmland, mining interests outside France, and sat on the boards of several important industrial undertakings, including the Saint Gobain Glass Company.

"I'm a glass-maker," it pleased him to declare, thereby recalling the fact that he exercised one of the only two trades, coal and glass, that the King had authorized to the nobility of Lorraine. He managed his properties and his businesses with a careful, if impatient, dispatch, a gift of clear decision and a sense of his personal superiority that was barely tolerable to others.

It was naturally to the Duc that a young man with carefully smoothed hair said in a voice suitably modulated to the occasion: "The Minister regrets that he has been unable to come in person and has commanded me to offer you his sincere condolences."

"Which Minister?" asked the Duc.

"The Minister of National Education."

"Please thank him very much, Monsieur."

And Valleroy shook hands with the attaché from the Secretariat with the high good manners of one power in courteous relations with another.

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Then he whispered in Jean-Noël's ear (though even his whispers had considerable carrying power): "Lachaume is represented. It is very proper."

The old people of the "grand tournament" came by, and behind them more old people, weeping for themselves, who thought it necessary to peck at Jean-Noël's cheeks with their tearful faces and wet lips.

Marie-Ange was better protected beneath her crêpe veil. Aunt Isabelle had lent her the hat and veil.

"I've got so many mourning hats . . ." Isabelle had said.

The latter was standing next to Marie-Ange and seemed to be the only person really affected by Madame de La Monnerie's death.

Inès Sandoval took both Jean-Noël's hands in hers and murmured: "You can't imagine what an effort I've made for you. I'm always terribly upset by the apparatus of death. Why are the dead covered with these hideous black trappings . . . ?"

Jean-Noël looked at her dispassionately and saw her as she was, the forty-five years, the thin wrinkles on the forehead, the sallow, rather dry skin, the forced, factitious emotionalism.

"Shall I see you tonight?" she whispered.

"I'll telephone you," he replied, knowing he would not.

And he became aware of the extent to which the situation had been reversed, and of the immediate advantage one has over a woman one has ceased to love, when she does not yet know it.

Inès moved away, her progress as usual being in eighths of a circle. She went out in the company of Professor Lartois.

Among the people who formed part of the scanty procession Jean-Noël saw a face he thought he knew, though he could not put a name to it. It was the face of a man already of some age, but carefully preserved and with a youthful expression, a lock of wavy hair falling over the brow, a willowy, slightly hesitant walk, and a contrived yet discreet elegance of dress. Where had he seen him before? And when? Was it recently or long ago?

The elderly man with the wavy lock stopped to speak to no other member of the family, but came straight to Jean-Noël. He said: "I saw it in the papers this morning."

It was only then that Jean-Noël realized that this was Lord Pemrose. His presence was so unexpected, so unlikely, that Jean-Noël was taken aback and barely heard what the other was saying. Lord Pemrose was speaking with his head on one side, and with a curious wariness, an inexplicable embarrassment in his manner behind the façade of courtesy. But his expression showed sympathy, real interest and compassion. He twice raised his eyes to Jean-Noël's and the latter saw such a glow of friendship in them that he was touched.

"Really," he thought, "though he saw me only once for a few

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minutes the other night, he has come here for my sake. Or does he think it will please Inès? No, it's for my sake. How kind of him!"

And he felt almost ashamed of not feeling a real sorrow that would justify the trouble Lord Pemrose had taken and deserve his solicitude.

It was indeed the only face against which Jean-Noël felt inclined to place his cheek. A sense of affection and gratitude drew him towards the man, though, paralysed by surprise, he was incapable of making a gesture or uttering a word.

"If you ever feel lonely and have ten minutes to spare, do telephone me..."

And Lord Pemrose, turning his head away, moved quickly off as if the phrase he had just uttered was so audacious that he was afraid of it. Jean-Noël watched him go, thinking that he had not even muttered a word of thanks.

When Pemrose, having dabbled his fingers in the holy-water stoop, had disappeared, Jean-Noël did indeed feel lonely, and that weary, sensitive face seemed to him a refuge. "If you ever feel lonely..."

The ceremony at the cemetery did not last long. As they came away, Marie-Ange took off her hat, rolled it up in the veil and, giving it to her aunt, excused herself. She jumped into the nearest taxi and said to the driver: "Quick, 7 Rue Clément Marot."

III

In the Rue Clément Marot five hundred people were gathered round a clear space of floor, filling the grey-and-gold salons of the Maison Marcel Germain. The Press Show of the between-seasons collection had just begun, late as usual. The editors of the big women's weeklies, aristocrats of their profession, were seated by right in the front row. Behind them, in accordance with a precise and subtle precedence, were placed the fashion reporters of the Paris and provincial press; all these ladies were taking notes in shiny black notebooks.

The buyers from the American houses were there too, as well as a small number of men—illustrators, painters, stage designers and cloth-manufacturers—who showed no signs of being embarrassed in this hen-house.

Anet Brayat, his red beard across his chest, twiddled his dirty thumbs above his plump knees as he sat among the idols in the front row.

The mannequins came by, their hearts sinking with stage-fright, their eyes remote with an assumed indifference, moving with an artificial gait, a contrived nonchalance and unnatural attitudes, while they displayed the false smile of trapeze-artists at the end of a turn.

A woman was announcing the names of the models. Last season Marcel Germain had adopted those of mountains and volcanoes for his

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dresses. Today he had selected the names of small cakes, the tailor-mades were called "Friand," "Sablé" and "Macaron," while the wedding-dress, in *broderie anglaise*, was called "Puits d'Amour."

Germain had also invented the season's colour: "Eternity" blue.

Marcel Germain himself, in a periwinkle-blue coat and a flame-coloured bow-tie, his eyes bulging slightly and his blond hair looking like a wavy wig, was walking up and down the passages in a state of nerves, anxiety and agitation, watching for applause, like a playwright at his first night.

"Oh, my dears, 'Brioche' is not going down well! Yes, I know what I'm talking about, that coat's a failure," he was saying to the group of cutters and head saleswomen who surrounded him. "I knew it, we should never have let it go. And what about Mama? Have you seen Mama? Is Mama in absolute despair? Poor Mama!"

Madame Germain, the creator's mother, looking pink and sensible beneath her white hair, was sitting among the important American buyers, distributing smiles and encouragement.

The senior employees were busy reassuring the dressmaker, while the business manageress, Madame Merlier, a woman with a distinguished profile, and hair drawn severely back from the forehead, was doing her best to instil a little manly fortitude.

But Germain went on wringing his hands. They were in the midst of crisis. As always, there were models that had not been got ready in time. The dressmaker and his staff had worked till three o'clock in the morning, in the studio, rectifying details, and indeed even since the show had begun, the workroom had been busy with their last thoughts.

"And 'Mille Feuilles': is 'Mille Feuilles' ready?" Marcel Germain asked. "Really, it's too appalling! What on earth's the workroom doing with 'Marguerite'? 'Mille Feuilles' is the *clou* of the collection. The whole thing depends on it. Merlier, dear, please, please, go and see what's going on!"

She was the third person he had sent in the last ten minutes to find out what was happening to "Mille Feuilles."

"If we can't show that dress, I don't mind telling you I shall close down the business tonight," Germain declared. "I'll put everyone out on the street. A cigarette, I want a cigarette. No, not those, mine. Where are they? Look at her, look at her, Chantal, just look at her!" he groaned, pointing to a mannequin on the point of entering the big salon. "She's forgotten her ear-rings. Really, I promise you, it's enough to kill one!"

It was at this moment that he was informed of the arrival of Mademoiselle Dual who wished to select, with urgency, a dress for the stage.

"Oh no! Oh no!" cried the dressmaker. "She must come back later,

tomorrow. I don't care a damn about these ladies from the Comédie Française. I can't attend to anybody on any pretext whatever."

But someone whispered in his ear.

"Oh, this is absolutely the last straw!" moaned Germain, wringing his hands.

And he rushed to meet Simon Lachaume, saying: "My dear Minister, what an honour, what a pleasure! Madame Merlier, Madame Merlier, see that room is made for the Minister in the front row at once, next to Mama . . ."

"No, no, certainly not," said Lachaume, determined not to go into the big salon. "I've only got a minute to spare and I don't want to disturb anyone."

Simon was as angry at being there as was Germain to see the Minister appear at such an inconvenient moment.

"As if accompanying my mistress to a dressmaker's were not ridiculous enough in itself," thought Simon. "She *would* have to choose a day on which the collection's being shown and with all these journalists here. It'll look well in the papers tomorrow."

While Sylvaine went to try on, he said in an endeavour to make his presence appear not altogether absurd: "I've been wanting to visit a great dressmaker's establishment for a long time. So I've taken the opportunity of a free moment and the fact that Mademoiselle Dual was coming here. So, my dear fellow, will you show me round your establishment and explain things to me?"

Marcel Germain felt faint. Or rather, he would have liked to faint in reality; it would have been an excuse. But he had to do as he was asked.

"Where are your offices? Where do your designers work? How many employees have you?" Lachaume asked.

By a sort of professional reflex he had adopted the manner of an official visit and the tone of voice proper to the opening of a public building.

Germain, listening vainly for some echo of applause from the big salon, opened doors and gave brief explanations.

"And your workrooms? How many workers have you in each? And what are those?" he asked, pointing to fifty lay figures, covered in ticking, that stood crowded together at the end of a passage.

"They are lay figures made to the personal measurements of my principal customers," Germain replied. "With these I can make my customers' dresses, even if they have no time to try on or happen to be abroad."

"How very odd they look!" said Simon going up to them.

On each lay figure's stomach a ticket was sewn bearing the customer's name in indelible pencil. Simon read: "Duchesse de Valleroy, Lady Coxram, Madame Boitel, Señora Davilar, Madame Bonnefoy. Here,

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exposed, were the skinny lines of the old Duchesse de Salvimonte and the hugely bulging contours of Mrs Worms-Parnell.

It was a strange cemetery, a common grave of luxury.

Here the richest and most famous women in the world were ranged side by side, armless and headless statues moulded in horse-hair and ticking, their shoulders too narrow or too broad, their breasts sagging, their waists too thick or their flanks emaciated, like rubbish from unsatisfactory archaeological diggings.

Simon knew how some of these women looked naked, and amused himself by checking his memories against the lay figures.

"Ah," he thought, "there's Marthe's bulging stomach; there's Inès's deformed hip . . ."

"Yes, that's what they're like," said Marcel Germain; "and every day of your life you see what I manage to make of them. I have eight hundred people employed on it."

Leading off the passage were the workrooms, decorated like school-rooms with drably distempered walls. In each workroom forty overalled women swarmed like grey shrimps in the bottom of a net, women who made the most expensive dresses in the world and who, that very evening, before going home to their suburbs, would put on an old jumper and a worn skirt over their underclothes of artificial silk.

But at the moment Germain was not thinking of his workrooms. He had but one idea: to get back to the presentation of his collection.

"My dear Minister, I'm going to show you the changing-room, something I never show anyone."

They returned to the sales-rooms.

Germain opened a door and Simon Lachaume thought that he had entered the dressing-room of a music-hall between scenes. A dozen girls, brunettes, blondes, redheads, Germain's twelve mannequins, were in a state of animated confusion in a windowless cell, crudely lit with naked electric bulbs. They were dressing and undressing in an unimaginable chaos of arms, legs, hair and materials; they were all talking at once and making such a noise that you couldn't hear yourself speak. As soon as a girl arrived back from the salon, the last of the applause still sounding in her wake, she began undressing, while the next mannequin went out, immediately assuming her professional walk, her public gait. Navels appeared and disappeared, backbones projected from pale, supple bodies as they bent to knot a shoe-ribbon. The heads of the workrooms, like dressers in a theatre, were on their knees at the feet of these beautiful creatures who carried their colours, removing the thread of a forgotten tack, checking the fall of a drape, or moving a button to its right place. The mannequins, as they made ready to go out, gave their hair a last touch of the comb before a dressing-table fixed flush to the wall, where each had her own chair, a shelf, and a locked drawer.

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For these twelve girls, who lived together in constant nudity and knew every mole on each other's bodies, nevertheless each required a locked drawer of her own in which to keep her lipstick, her money and her little secrets.

The air was heavy with expensive scents, and also with human odours that were tolerable only because they emanated from young bodies. But all this animated flesh, these fluttering tissues, produced a curiously electric effect, and the temperature in the changing-room was several degrees higher than elsewhere.

Simon tried without success to distinguish one from another of these girls who had been selected for their beauty: they had all the same long legs, slim hips and flat stomachs.

Someone jostled the Minister and cried: "Here's 'Mille Feuilles'!"

A mass of rustling tissue was carried past him, as disjointed as the caterpillar of a switchback in a fair. There was a sound of tearing, and Marcel Germain uttered a scream and raised his hands to his hair. 'Mille Feuilles' had caught on the handle of a cupboard.

"It's nothing, nothing," someone cried, "we'll put a stitch in it. Marie-Ange, Marie-Ange, forward, hurry!"

She was at the farther end of the changing-room. Simon had not noticed her amid the whirlwind; and had her name not been called, he would most certainly not have recognized her. For a moment he was not sure that it was her. So far as he could tell, she had similar arms, similar shoulders and the same way of holding her head, but there could be many Marie-Anges. He suddenly remembered her saying: "I work at a dressmaker's." Their eyes met; she seemed also to have recognized him. They exchanged an embarrassed smile, due to the peculiar circumstance of their meeting in such a place, and because of its absurdity for both of them.

Simon had seen her only masked; and now, here she was, appearing unexpectedly before him, not only with her face uncovered, but with her body naked but for a diminutive brassière and a g-string. Because he knew her, though he had not noticed her until that moment, she seemed to him more beautiful and more alive than the other mannequins. But now three people were busy about her, putting her into the dress, and Simon went out to end what appeared to him as an intrusion.

IV

When Simon went back into the fitting-room, Sylvaine said angrily: "There was no point in your coming if you're not going to take any interest in me at all."

As soon as he saw Sylvaine again, Simon's ill-humour returned and his awareness of wasting his time.

"Well, have you found the dress you were looking for?" he asked.

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"No, it's simply appalling; there's nothing suitable and nothing fits. I don't know what I'm going to do."

"In that case you'll have to resign yourself to the dress provided by the theatre," said Simon, looking at his watch.

He had spent a quarter of an hour visiting the establishment. It would take him five minutes to be driven back to the Ministry.

Madame Merlier, who had shown Sylvaine six dresses and was now conscious of the beginnings of a scene, said quickly: "Wait a minute, I'll show you 'Mille Feuilles.' I'm quite sure it's what you want. Germain is mad about the dress; it's his masterpiece."

Madame Merlier's smile showed white, even teeth. It was an instantaneous smile which she could switch on and off, keep in place for ten minutes at a time, or dispel in a second; it made no difference to the expression of the rest of her face.

There were sounds of prolonged applause from the big salon.

"Listen, that's the dress being shown," said Madame Merlier.

Then her smile disappeared as though wiped off with a rubber and she called through the open door: "Tell Marie-Ange not to undress and to come here at once!"

A moment later Marie-Ange came in, dressed in superimposed layers of organdie in pastel shades of all the colours of the spectrum. It was as if a slice of the rainbow had been imprisoned.

"You see, Germain wanted to create a garden-party dress," explained Madame Merlier, replacing her smile, "that would set the fashion for the Exhibition dresses. It's the dress of the year. It's really a very, very pretty thing, at once rich and light, suitable for a great actress such as yourself to make an entrance on the stage. It's worthy of you."

Sylvaine looked at it, thought about it, imagined herself in her part.

"What do you think of it, Simon?" she asked.

"Really very pretty," Simon replied, looking Marie-Ange straight in the eyes, which made her blush slightly.

Unfortunately it was impossible to copy the dress within forty-eight hours. Unless Germain was prepared to lend the model . . .

"I'll put it on at once," said Sylvaine. "You've still got a moment, darling?"

"Yes, a very short moment," said Simon without ceasing to gaze at Marie-Ange, as if he wished her to understand: "It's for you I'm staying."

For decency's sake, he went to the other side of the velvet curtain, while Sylvaine and Marie-Ange undressed and Madame Merlier called a fitter.

And suddenly Sylvaine saw in the looking-glass Simon's eyes staring through a gap in the curtains that had not been properly closed. They were moving backwards and forwards between her back and the

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mannequin's, appearing to compare them, to judge the two bodies, the two women, before coming pleasantly to rest on the younger.

She felt a surge of jealousy and shook her flaming hair; she could not help thinking of her own physical imperfections, of the red patches on her shoulders, the little rolls of fat that had recently appeared at her waist and that no massage could remove, of her breasts that were beginning to sag, of her hips that were growing wider.

She put on "Mille Feuilles" with her teeth clenched. The dress would not do up by some four inches. Sylvaine contracted herself, struggled, drew in her stomach, all in vain. "I'll manage it, all the same, I'll manage it . . ."

"It's nothing at all, nothing at all," said Madame Merlier, noting all that was going on. "You see, Marguerite," she went on, talking to the fitter, "the length is perfect. It must be let out a little at the waist, and the shoulder altered a little here . . ."

"I really don't know how those girls manage to get into it!" cried Sylvaine. "To be as thin as that is almost to be deformed!"

She looked at Marie-Ange with hatred. And then, addressing her directly, she added: "When I come to think of it, at your age I was as thin as you are, my child. Only then I was dying of hunger."

Marie-Ange pretended not to notice the contradiction in these last words, nor yet the contempt of the "my child." Wrapping herself in a dressing-gown they brought her, she went out, saying: "Goodbye, Madame."

Simon's interest in the girl was increased still further by her calm dignity in face of Sylvaine's rudeness.

She was about to pass him with a simple inclination of the head, but he stopped her, extended his hand and said with a kindly smile: "So I've unmasked you at last?"

"To the limit," replied Marie-Ange with simplicity, smiling also.

"Have you been here long?"

"Three months," she said. "It's not always much fun, but of course when one has to . . ."

"I can see that," said Simon, wishing to indicate that he divorced himself from his mistress's attitude and condemned it.

"Schoudler's granddaughter doing this trade," he thought. And, without thinking of the circumstances, or rather thinking of them too late, he said: "I'm terribly sorry I could not get to your grandmother's funeral. You have all my sympathy."

"I understand very well," said Marie-Ange. "Besides, you sent someone, we were most touched . . ."

And they were both embarrassed equally by the falseness of their predicaments.

"You have courage and I congratulate you," said Simon, for something to say.

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When Sylvaine saw Simon talking in this friendly way to the mannequin, her fury almost made her dizzy. She no longer heard what was being said to her, and answered without thinking.

Yes, she would take the dress. That one, or another, it didn't matter. There was only one thing she wanted, to be back in the car with Simon and give him a piece of her mind. She would not have him behaving so stupidly, so rudely, and making her look ridiculous.

"As for terms," said Madame Merlier with her perpetual smile, "I don't really know what Marcel Germain can do for you. The trouble is that your programmes will have already been printed with the name of some competing establishment shown as your supplier . . ."

At the other end of the fitting-room Simon had taken out his notebook and was writing down Marie-Ange's telephone number. "Trocadéro 67-48. What? Still the same number as your grandfather's?"

"Yes, still the same," said Marie-Ange, "but it won't be for much longer. We shall sell the house, I expect."

"This is really too much! This is pure provocation!" thought Sylvaine. She was on the point of creating a scene. "Smack that chit of a girl's face . . ." Madame Merlier was making signs with her eyes to Marie-Ange to go, and was promising herself to give her a good ticking off: "Not during working hours, my child, and not with the lovers of customers." But Marie-Ange did not see her.

"I'll telephone you soon," said Simon, "I very much want to see you again."

And Marie-Ange was sure that he would do nothing about it, and in any case she did not much care.

Then from the mannequin's dressing-room there were shouts of: "Marie-Ange!" And she ran off.

The presentation of the collection was over and people were beginning to leave. Simon, who did not wish to be caught in the crowd, said to Sylvaine: "Well, have you fixed everything up? You'll look perfect, I'm sure. I must go. See you this evening."

And Sylvaine was left there, pale, hating, furious, with the prospect of having to contain her anger till dinner-time.

V

The painters' ladders were stacked in the scullery. A smell of white lead and turpentine filtered under the doors and invaded the rooms.

Sylvaine had at last decided to leave the entresol in the Rue de Naples, where she had lived for fifteen years. She had leased a flat in the Avenue Kléber, Simon's district. This coincided with her becoming a member of the Comédie Française. "It's a new stage in my life. I'm sloughing off the past," Sylvaine thought.

The flat was much too big for one person. But Sylvaine hoped

secretly that one day Simon would marry her. Whatever pretence she made of proclaiming her liking for independence, all her efforts were directed towards that goal.

It was the last rung to conquer in the ladder of social consideration. Of course Simon was still bound to that insignificant woman whom nobody knew. He had married her inadvertently early in life, but had not seen her for a long time past. He had often said that he would divorce when he felt the need, and Sylvaine was waiting for him to take the decision. She had chosen this flat, with its vast reception-room, thinking that Simon would soon come and live in it with her.

She had believed that everything would be ready in a fortnight, and had given notice too soon in the Rue de Naples. The work of decorating, which had now been going on for six weeks, was not yet finished, and Sylvaine had had to take up her residence in a builder's yard.

Three pieces of luxuriously useless furniture were stranded in a white desert, under wall-lights in plaster shells that dazzled the eyes. Sylvaine was at the end of her tether; she could neither pay her bills nor finish the decorating. Her new life was proving expensive. And the smell of paint was inducing a headache, smarting eyes, and a feeling of nausea.

Sylvaine, before going to Germain, had insisted that Simon should come and dine there tonight with her—"a lovers' dinner, just the two of us alone"—that he might see how charming the flat would be once it was finished, how worthy of him, how worthy of them both, and to ask Simon if he could help in her difficulties. After all, it was for him that she was taking all this trouble.

Simon had promised to come at eight o'clock; it was nearly ten when he arrived. He had made his speech very late; the debate had been protracted, and afterwards he had been kept by the Secretaries of the Federations.

While waiting for him Sylvaine had drunk a third of a bottle of whisky and her anger of the morning had continued to grow.

Simon, still full of the success of his speech, saw nothing, listened to nothing, and, chin held high, voice cadenced, he repeated his speech, apparently for Sylvaine's benefit, but in reality for his own.

"And when I said: 'The history of catastrophe avoided can never be written,' I was in some fear that the phrase might be above the audience's heads, but there was a thunder of applause."

"What an egoist, what a monstrous egoist," thought Sylvaine.

They dined in the bedroom, on a card-table without a cloth, because the cloths were in the bottom of a trunk whose key had been lost. The maid had gone to the cinema and as Sylvaine brought in the dishes that had grown dry in the oven, she thought: "When I think that I might be dining at Maxim's with that Peruvian diplomat who's been hanging on the end of my telephone for the last three days..."

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They stacked the dirty plates on the bedroom parquet. Simon wanted caviar and champagne. As he grew older, the rarer foods were becoming his everyday fare. But there was no caviar, and the champagne was warm because the refrigerator had not yet been connected.

And suddenly, because of the warm wine, Simon became aware of all the things he had failed to notice since his arrival—the bareness of the walls, the plates on the floor, the over-cooked food, the ridiculous size of the flat, and the smell of paint that seemed to be hitting him on the head with an iron bar.

“And I might be at Maxim’s dining comfortably with a new girl who would amuse me, such as Marie-Ange Schoudler,” he thought. “I don’t get so many free evenings that I can afford to waste them like this.”

It was at this moment Sylvaine chose to give vent to the resentment that had been boiling up in her all day.

Simon, with the restraint of a man who desired only peace and quiet, explained as gently as possible who the girl was to whom he had spoken, and that he took an interest in her because of the links he had had with the Schoudler family in the past.

“What does this sudden access of generosity mean?” cried Sylvaine. “Everyone knows that your career is based on betraying the Schoudlers. Do you take me for a fool?”

“My career is based on my talent,” Simon replied drily.

“If that girl had a pug-nose, I very much doubt whether you’d feel so kindly towards her. You’re dishonest, disgusting and ridiculous. You’ve slept all your life with old women.”

“They may seem old to you, but most of them, at the time I slept with them, were no older than you are today,” replied Simon, maintaining a calm that exasperated Sylvaine.

And he was thinking: “She’ll end by getting what she wants. She’ll get her scene all right. How useless and sordid it all is.”

“And now,” she cried, “you take the addresses of mannequins in dressmakers’ establishments. Oh, he’s a fine one, our Minister is, so dignified! You’re vile!”

“Seeing a mannequin’s degrading, is it?”

“Of course. It’s low and it’s vulgar.”

“Whereas sleeping with you, who began as a hostess in a night-club . . .”

Try as he would, Simon was beginning to give way to anger and his expression hardened.

“You’re a cad, an absolute cad to say that,” Sylvaine replied. “I hadn’t enough to eat, I was down and out, on the pavement . . .”

“There are other ways of getting off the pavement than going on the streets.”

As she tried to smack his face, Simon caught her hand, twisted her arm and threw her on the bed.

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Tears were pouring from Sylvaine's eyes, but her anger was undiminished. Her beautiful auburn hair was tousled and spread about her face, while the sort of fever that held her in its grip seemed to release a strong odour from her body that mingled with the smell of paint.

"If I'm a whore," she cried, "why do you live with me? If I'm a whore, why did you get me into the Français?"

"That's exactly what I'm wondering," Simon replied slowly.

And the quarrel followed its course, outwardly similar to fifty others, while Sylvaine, as usual, began undressing.

Their mutual reproaches and insults mingled the past and the present in a sordid battle, in which Simon had the advantages of self-control and a wounding command of language while Sylvaine had the greater fury.

Simon reproached her with Edouard Wilner's old body, and Lulu Maublanc's dead one, and many more. But she had weapons of defence, from Inès Sandoval's too-short leg to Madame Éterlin's close-set eyes.

Then Sylvaine began playing her favourite rôle, that is to say her own personality, or rather the personality she thought was hers, the great martyred lover.

"You've never understood me," she said, "and you never will. No man can understand. I'm the sort that gives. You don't realize all I've given you, or you despise it."

"But what do you give?" Simon cried. "Give, give, the woman gives, we give; one hears nothing else day in and day out! There are a certain number of you women who, because you're lucky enough to get rather more pleasure from making love than the rest, shout that you give. But good God, what do you give? A bloody lot of trouble, that's all! In all the fifty years I've lived and the more than thirty in which I've been making love, I've never yet been able to discover what this famous gift is. It must be something that lies so deep inside you that it never comes to the surface. And in the name of this mysterious gift, you demand everything we've got, our time, our money and our peace of mind. Why don't you just admit that you enjoy yourselves; and stop asking us to pay for the pleasures that we're responsible for?"

And he realized that he, too, had been automatically undressing.

And then, so as not to appear ridiculous, he got into bed.

VI

Lying beside him, Sylvaine went on with her monologue. The storm subsided by degrees, but Simon made no reply and even failed to listen to the last breakers.

Lying on his back, his spectacles on the bedside table, his open eyes

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fixed on the new ceiling, Simon thought how personally degrading and injurious this liaison was, and how it interfered with his efficiency as a Minister.

"Either no one, or a companion," he thought; "but not this, not her, not this sort of woman. And perhaps she still thinks that one day I'll marry her. We no longer love each other; at any rate I don't love her any more. We're trapped in our dead love like two accomplices in crime. One of us must make up his mind to give the other away."

He no longer desired her. He still felt disgusted when he thought of all the hands that had fondled her body before his time.

"I've had enough of her." No, he no longer desired her, and an instinct of self-preservation was aroused in him. Since he had used his influence to get Sylvaine into the leading state-supported theatre, she had become ridiculously grand. Simon guessed at the financial difficulties behind this outsize apartment and knew that, sooner or later, he would end by having to shoulder the responsibility, as he always did, for Sylvaine's debts.

"A moment comes when one must cut one's losses, because whatever one may do one can no longer win them back. I've wagered enough on Sylvaine and lost enough."

It occurred to him that he had not so many years left in which to enjoy life to the full, and that he must use his strength for his own happiness.

He imagined someone young beside him, someone just discovering life, whom he would be able to fashion to his liking, someone with a fresh, new body. And this someone took on the features of Marie-Ange.

Sylvaine had fallen silent at last. She put out her hand and switched off the light. Simon immediately switched it on again and put on his spectacles.

"Well, have you finished, are you feeling better?" he asked.

"You needn't take advantage of the fact that I can't be angry with you for long."

"Good," Simon went on, "because I'm going away."

And he got out of bed.

"Going? You might have said so earlier. What's the matter with you?"

"I'm going. Don't you understand the French language? I'm going," Simon repeated. "It's over. I suppose you can lend me a suitcase to pack my things in? I'll send my chauffeur back with it tomorrow."

Sylvaine sat up in bed.

Her nightdress was slipping from her shoulders.

"Simon, don't be a fool," she said, "and don't play that silly game with me; it doesn't frighten me in the least. If you think I'm going to go on my knees to ask you to stay . . ."

"Certainly not!" he replied.

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"All right, my dear, do as you like, it's your look-out," she said, pretending to a dignified indifference.

He dressed methodically and unhurriedly, fastened his sock-suspenders, tied his shoe-laces. The thought that in a few minutes' time he, the Minister for National Education, was going to go out into the night and walk the streets, suitcase in hand, like any student, filled him with joy, a warm, personal, satisfying joy.

"When you come to think of it, the best pleasures in life are available to everyone. Breaking it off with a woman, for instance; anyone can have that satisfaction."

Though he did nothing in particular to reveal it, Simon's happiness was obvious; it seemed to emanate from every pore. When Sylvaine became aware of it, when she grasped the fact that there was no element of a desire to wound in this sneaking joy of his, when she heard Simon go to the box-room and fetch a suitcase, when she understood that this was no malicious joke, nor a passing moment of anger, but an irrevocable decision, she felt herself turn pale and her heart panic.

Her first thought was: "If he's really leaving me, what am I going to do about this flat and all my unpaid bills? This is simply appalling..."

Then she thought: "And the Français? Four days before my first night! If it's known that Simon's left me, everyone that's jealous of me and hates me will no longer have any reason to fear me..."

Then she thought that Simon was her dearest, most precious, most important possession in the world, that his dull grey eyes were those she could read better than anyone else's, that his stocky figure, his bald head, his red ribbon, his cockaded car, and his curt voice on the telephone, were her only protection in the world; and his heavy, ungraceful body was the one nearest her heart. It was when she looked at Simon's naked body, the thick folds of his stomach, the greying hair on his chest and his short wrists, that she really knew what it was to love.

Simon was moving quickly between the bathroom and the bedroom, collecting his spare razor, his pyjamas, his dressing-gown, his books, some with inscriptions, that from time to time he had brought for Sylvaine, and a little American wireless set. He suddenly had no indulgence for this woman who had cost him so dear.

At every movement he made she became more and more aware of all that was being taken from her.

Between the books was a grotesque little bronze figure intended for an incense-burner, one of those pieces of false *chinoiserie*, not worth twenty francs, one wins at fairs. But it had the importance of a sort of fetish in their love; and it dated back to the very early days of their liaison. How had Simon acquired it? He could no longer remember. No doubt it was due to his having taken fifty tickets in a charity sweepstake of which he was patron. "Do give it to me," Sylvaine had said.

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"No, I'll lend it to you." "Oh, do give it to me; it looks so like you." "All right then, it'll be ours." "I shall never be able to do anything wicked in its presence."

The figure had been the occasion of a hundred other foolishnesses of the kind. Sometimes it had been displeased with them and been turned with its face to the wall. Then it would be turned full face, or placed in profile. Reconciliations took place in its presence.

After five years of life together this hideous knick-knack was the only thing they owned in common.

Sylvaine watched Simon, waiting to see what he would do with the figure. She knew that it was her best chance, might give her an opportunity of reopening their quarrel, to be followed by a tender reconciliation and a fit of weeping. And tomorrow morning they would laugh about the half-packed suitcase, lying so absurdly open on the carpet.

Simon took the books and did not even touch the incense-burner. Sylvaine had been preparing to scream if he took it. She very nearly did so involuntarily because he left it.

"How stupid I am, how stupid!" she thought.

"Take it, I don't want ever to see it again!" she said, as if it were an insult.

He made no reply, did not even bother to shrug his shoulders, but shut the suitcase and carried it into the hall.

Sylvaine jumped out of bed and ran barefoot through the flat, shouting: "Simon, Simon, not like that! You can't go like that!"

She caught him and clung to him.

"Not like that," she repeated.

"How do you expect me to leave? By the window with a rope?"

"No, Simon, no, you can't! Think of all the times we've had together."

"The times we have had make no difference to those we can't have any more."

Sylvaine wept, groaned, clung to him, simulated hysteria with so much conviction that it became real.

"Try to show a little dignity for once," Simon said.

He led her back into the bedroom.

"You can't do this; it's wrong, it's mean," said Sylvaine between her sobs.

"And all this, everything, I did it for you," she added, vaguely indicating the bare flat. "I shan't be able to go on living here."

"I never asked you to lease a station hall," said Simon. "Go on, go back to bed."

"And the whole thing's because of a mannequin. It all began over a mannequin."

"No, not because of a mannequin," he said.

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It was because of a bad dinner, a flat smelling of paint, a lack of desire, and five years of jealousy, scenes and continual demands.

She was sitting on the edge of the bed, her nightdress twisted round her knees, her hands clutching her wild hair.

"It's because we've been foolish enough not to get married that we hurt each other so much," she said, still weeping. "If we were married, I wouldn't care a damn if you slept with all the mannequins in the world. I should know I came first and would always matter to you."

"I am married. And you know how much my wife matters to me," Simon said with a laugh.

"You don't know how much I was prepared to give up for your sake."

"Too kind," he said.

Whatever she did, wherever she tried to catch hold of him, she found herself on a slippery slope and fell to the ground.

"No, you can't do it, not like this," she went on. "You're killing me. At least give me time to get used to it. That at least you can't refuse me. A week, give me a week."

"Yes, of course," Simon said ironically, "so that your first night'll be over, so that you can vent your nerves on me, as you do before every play."

"But there won't be any play, I shall never be able to appear in four days' time. Look at me, look at the state I'm in! How do you expect me to have the strength to act, or remember a single line? My career's finished, my life's over. You're crushing me, destroying me. It's a murder, a crime. There ought to be a law to punish crimes like this!"

At the moment she was sincere; she was quite sure that she would not be able to act, to rise above such a disaster.

"A word of advice," Simon said. "Use more voice on the stage, and less in life. And everything will go well with you."

"I don't need your advice," she cried, getting to her feet.

She looked for something to throw. She was on the point of hurling herself at him, nails to the fore.

She saw that he was ready for her, and there was such hatred in his eyes that she was afraid.

He was the stronger; she had no resources left and felt that she was utterly abandoned.

"Have I really made you so unhappy that you should hate me so much?" she asked with a sort of dismay.

For the first time that night she had moved him. He hesitated for a moment, but the instinct of self-preservation prevented his replying.

"Simon, you'll regret this," she said in a tragic voice.

"That would surprise me," he said.

"You don't know what I'm capable of doing."

He knew that she had no weapon in the flat. He wondered whether

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she would wait for him outside the Ministry tomorrow, pistol in hand. She was fond enough of publicity to do it. But tomorrow she would be calmer. She was too concerned for herself to be the kind that commits murder.

"Simon, if you leave me tonight I shall kill myself."

"That indeed would be the only service you could do me," he replied.

"Don't you believe me? Don't you believe I'm capable of doing it?"

"Absolutely not," Simon said.

To feel herself hated was already more than she could bear. But to be despised as well, and to this extent . . .

"All right, you'll see," she said.

She went into the bathroom, took a tube of veronal from the medicine-cupboard, came back and showed it to Simon.

"Yes, I see it," he said. "But you can't blackmail me."

"It isn't blackmail."

"Really?"

He defied her with a cruel, cynical gaze and she stared back at him. Simon's lips suddenly puckered as an idea came to him.

He took the tube, went into the bathroom, filled a tooth glass with water and poured the whole contents of the full tube into it. He looked in the cupboard, found another tube, counted out another ten tablets and dissolved them. He felt a strange and rather pleasant excitement. He was acting with extreme lucidity. As might a practised criminal, he wiped the tubes and the handle of the spoon with a towel to remove his fingerprints. Then he came back into the bedroom, carrying the glass in the towel, as if he were drying its bottom. Should there be an inquest, it would be safer.

"You beast, you filthy beast," Sylvaine muttered.

It occurred to her that she had used the same word to De Voos and to Wilner; they were all beasts. All men behaved disgustingly when they left her. It was as if they invented for her a peculiar perfidy, a particular ignominy. But this one beat the lot, and by a long way.

He put the glass down on the bedside table.

"There you are," he said.

She did not move. Her eyes staring, she thought of her fate, of the appalling fate that always attracted to her hatred and vengeance, that inspired men with the most horrible ideas and made her lovers her worst enemies. Why hope for another, why look for another? The others would all be the same.

"You see," said Simon.

"What do I see?" she murmured.

"That you're a coward."

"Why am I a coward? Because I don't commit suicide."

"No, because you always say you're going to do things that you're

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not capable of doing. *Hullo, I'd forgotten the ashtray,*" he said, seeing on the mantelpiece a little silver bowl that belonged to him.

He crossed the room and put the ashtray in his pocket.

"Simon!" he heard her scream behind him.

He turned round. She was standing, her eyes wide and staring; the glass in her hand was empty.

Simon wondered where she had thrown the contents, under the bed or in the flower-vase.

She let the glass fall to the carpet, seized Simon by the arm and shook him. "I'm mad," she cried, "I've drunk it. I'm mad. I've drunk it, I tell you! How many did you put in it?"

"Enough," said Simon. "You can go and look at the tubes."

She ran to the bathroom and came back at once.

"Simon, quick, quick, a doctor. I'm mad! What have I done? You must call Lartois or Morand at once. Morand's number is Carnot . . ."

Simon put his hand on the telephone-receiver and held it firmly down.

"Simon, Simon!" she screamed. "You're not going to let me die. It was to show you."

"Well, go on showing me."

"But now I have shown you. I've shown you that I can do it. Simon, I want to live, I want to live! All right, I'm a coward. All right, you'll leave me. All right, you'll do what you like. But not this, not this! I'm dying, don't you see?"

She thought that the appalling horror that made her blood run cold was already the effect of the drug. She was gasping for breath.

"The telephone . . . the telephone . . . the telephone," she muttered over and over again.

Her hands clutched at Simon's against the telephone. For several minutes, they struggled sordidly. She hurled herself on him, kicked his shins, bit him.

"Help!"

Simon hit her on the mouth and she collapsed.

She tried to get up to run to the window or the door. Terror paralysed her legs. Dragging herself on her knees, she came back to the telephone and began muttering again: "The telephone . . . the telephone . . . the telephone . . ."

Then the poison really began to take effect and quieted her nerves.

Suddenly tottering, as if she had received a blow on the back of the neck, she went over to the bed. She looked at Simon strangely.

"You did it . . . you did it . . ." she murmured.

She began muttering endlessly in a thick voice; there was fear in her words, then the misfortunes of her life, then the anxieties of a first night, then fear once more.

Her face had turned grey.

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"I'm cold," she said.

And a moment later she said: "I'm sleepy . . ."

Then she stopped talking.

Her breathing had become feeble, very slow and almost imperceptible. She looked as if she had been drowned.

Simon stood looking at her for some time, feeling neither emotion nor pity.

He tried to think what the sequel of events would be. Sylvaine would doubtless be cold by the time the maid arrived in the morning. Sylvaine was never called before ten o'clock. No one would know either the exact time at which he had left or the precise moment when she had poisoned herself. The fact that he had taken his razor and his books would almost certainly arouse servants' gossip. But even if that were so, it would not be embarrassing; on the contrary, it would make Sylvaine's act plausible and explicable in his friends' eyes.

The evening papers would carry headlines across half the page: "ON THE EVE OF HER DEBUT AT THE COMEDIE FRANÇAISE SYLVAINÉ DUAL COMMITS SUICIDE WITH VERONAL." There would be references to overwork and nervous depression; her talent would be mentioned. And it would be whispered about Paris that she had killed herself for him, because he had left her. It could do him no harm, rather it would add a quality of mystery and passion to his reputation.

Really he was in luck! It was not everyone who found such an opportunity of getting out of an unsatisfactory love-affair.

Meanwhile Sylvaine was sinking gradually into death. "Shall I have any regrets?" Simon wondered, as he looked at her body. And he answered "no" with the utmost sincerity. Even his memories, which in love always act as an emollient, had become odious to him.

Sylvaine groaned slightly and her head slipped down the pillow, while the lower part of her face showed the same dismay as when she had said a little earlier: "Have I really made you so unhappy . . ."

As he looked at her face, Simon thought: "After all, I'm as responsible as she is. If I've let her lead me an appalling life, it's because I wanted it. The proof is, that the day I no longer want it . . . Perhaps I'm making her pay a little too dearly and a little too much alone. . ."

Certainly one of the laws of Simon's personal code was: "Never yield to the sentimental temptation of putting yourself in your adversary's place." And he would even add: "It's better to leave a dead enemy than a pardoned enemy behind one."

But in fact the enemy was not Sylvaine so much as the love he had had for her.

"Now that I've had the minor pleasure of seeing her die, it must suffice . . ."

But love was dead indeed, and it was not a doctor who could revive it.

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Simon took up the telephone-receiver and called Doctor Morand-Laumier.

The moment before he had been thinking of the wreath he would have placed on the body.

"Am I a coward too?" Simon wondered. "No, I'm cured."

He stayed there, waiting for the doctor, as he would have stopped by the roadside to attend to some unknown injured man. And with as little interest, as little enthusiasm: merely because these are things that are "done."

His main feeling was one of annoyance at having to postpone his childish pleasure of walking home through the streets carrying a suitcase.

Mademoiselle Dual's first night at the Comédie Française was postponed for ten days owing to the actress's indisposition. On the night the Minister of National Education's box was empty, which did not pass unnoticed. Sylvaine succeeded by her talent and will-power alone. She had a good press.

Sylvaine did not try to see Simon again. On the contrary, whenever she caught sight of him in a public place she fled. She was afraid of him, with a panic fear. And when she learned that Simon Lachaume had been seen dining with Marie-Ange Schoudler in a restaurant, she felt almost relieved.

CHAPTER THREE

The Age of Suffering

WHEN the time came for settling up Madame de La Monnerie's estate, Marie-Ange and Jean-Noël were unprepared for the appearance of so many devoted helpers, distant relations and old friends of the family, who were prepared to succour them with their assistance and knowledge.

Two young roe-deer wandering in the forest were suddenly attacked, pursued, set upon, strangled and torn to pieces by the pack; such, more or less, was the history of their inheritance.

Compared with the possessions of those who despoiled them, the two young people had really very little to inherit, but that little was enough to awaken covetousness and vanity.

It could not even be said that the operation was organized. Hounds do not organize themselves for the kill. They obey their instincts and

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their training. So behaved the dozen lawyers and businessmen who, linked by the long habit of connivance, had grown accustomed to hunt in concert wherever they scented profits.

It was Charles de Valleroy who set the ball rolling. As he came away from the solicitors, where as the head of the clan he had invited himself for the reading of the will, the Duc said to Jean-Noël: "Your grandmother always promised to leave me the little Lancret in the drawing-room. Besides, it comes from a Valleroy inheritance. I'm rather surprised she didn't mention it. Not that it matters, of course!"

"But of course it does. If Grandmama promised it to you, it's yours," replied Jean-Noël with naïve generosity.

Valleroy was not long troubled with feelings of delicacy. He acted in perfectly good faith. Madame de La Monnerie had never definitely refused it to him on the many occasions that he had said in a bantering way: "Look, Aunt Juliette, if you don't know who to leave that Lancret to when you come to make your will, you can always think of me."

"I'll send my chauffeur to collect it in the morning," he said. "There's no point in putting it on the inventory and paying duty on it."

That was how things began. The Lancret's vacant place on the faded hangings of the drawing-room was like the mark of the first blow of a pickaxe in a demolition.

Madame de La Monnerie had decided to leave her jewels to her niece Isabelle. The latter appeared not to realize that when the old lady had made her will, her jewels had represented but a very small part of her fortune, whereas now they were worth as much, if not more, than the few stocks and shares she had bequeathed. Isabelle calmly accepted the legacy, saying to Marie-Ange: "At your age one does not need jewels. One day they'll be yours anyhow. Besides, in your profession you wear only false ones. In any case the wishes of the dead must be respected."

When the house was put up for sale, together with the furniture and the poet's library, it was the turn of the auctioneers, the devoted expert advisers, the old ladies trafficking in antiques, the art dealers, the specialists in rare books, to reduce the two young people's inheritance like a plane moving backwards and forwards over a deal plank. Over the more important items, and indeed, down to the last trinket, they were fleeced right and left, while they did their best to look as if they knew what they were doing and thought themselves very clever by pretending to consult each other.

Once the funeral expenses, the death duties, the mortgage on the house in the Rue de Lübeck, the valuers' fees and the agent's commissions had been paid, there remained, when everything had been sold, an income of some fifteen thousand francs each for Jean-Noël and Marie-Ange. At least they had a free hand with the capital. And they still owned jointly the huge Château de Mauglaives on which they had

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to pay taxes though it brought nothing in; Mauglaives whose roof needed repairing, Mauglaives that had no electric light, Mauglaives whose hundred and fifteen rooms had been shut up for nearly four years, Mauglaives to which they never went. They would have been prepared to sell that too, if they could have found a buyer.

II

Jean-Noël had seen Lord Pemrose several times. He had been to tea in the gold-panelled drawing-rooms with their red damask hangings in the Hôtel Saint James and Albany. The elderly Englishman liked to stay in this old house that had belonged to the Noailles family and still preserved a certain air of grandeur with its three interior courtyards between the Rue de Rivoli and the Rue Saint Honoré, its numerous staircases, slow lifts, stucco scrolls surrounding the ceilings, and dull mirrors that seemed to reflect time itself. The style of 1900 harmonized perfectly with that of Louis XV. In the centre of this huge stone warren, Pemrose occupied a room some eighteen feet high, with looped velvet curtains, a Florentine table with a mosaic top, and a speaking-tube. Basil Pemrose laughed gently at this old-fashioned décor; but it was part of his character to be ironical about the things he liked, or perhaps only to like things about which he could be ironical.

Jean-Noël also accompanied his new friend on long rambles through Paris; for Basil Pemrose never grew tired of wandering admiringly through the city, and he knew it so intimately and minutely that Jean-Noël marvelled. It was Basil who showed the boy the capital in which he had been born.

It was the same with French literature. Jean-Noël, who had just finished with Lanson's text-books, was astonished to hear Lord Pemrose speak with natural familiarity not only of Montaigne and Pascal, of Jodelle and Guez de Balzac, but of Apollinaire, Cocteau and André Breton.

"You have read, of course, the *Contes Cruels* . . . You've read the *Manifeste du Surréalisme* . . . You've been, naturally, to the Rue Vieille-du-Temple . . ."

No, Jean-Noël knew none of these things, not even the Place des Vosges, only a little of the work of Valéry, and he had not yet had time to read Proust. Jean-Noël was the child of Racine and the Place de la Concorde, the offspring of Pierre Louÿs and the Trocadéro, the product of Anna de Noailles and the Boulevard Haussmann, the son of François Mauriac and the Church of the Madeleine.

"You know," Pemrose would say, "that there are metrical experiments in Antoine de Baif that one finds again in Valéry's prosody . . ."

They wandered through the Marais quarter, and Lord Pemrose was moved to enthusiasm by the names of the streets, Rue Sainte-Croix-de-

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la-Bretonnerie, Rue Geoffroy-l'Asnier, and grew ecstatic over the old houses, their door-knockers, a window, a relic of the Renaissance still showing high up on a façade like a piece of forgotten washing.

So they rambled together, an elderly man with grey, wavy hair, and nervous hands that fluttered like two long flowers from the same stem, and a fair boy, slim-hipped, blue-eyed, and classical of feature; they were the same height and equally slender, the one in his adolescence, the other in his decline; and they had so much the air of two foreigners visiting the city, so much the appearance of belonging to each other, that even the down-at-heel prostitutes at the corners of the Rue Quincampoix dared not accost them. They wandered by leprous walls and filthy pavements, venturing their thin shoes, grey flannel suits and the red carnations in their buttonholes in courts where shacks grew like warts and the air smelt dank even at the height of summer. All about them cobblers hammered at the boots of the poor; upholsterers, their mouths full of nails, repaired old furniture that would go back to the apartments in the residential quarters; drapers sold silk by the inch; children played hopscotch on the uneven cobbles or, as they crouched against the stone, invented wonderful stories for themselves about happier children; the baker's assistant dreamed dreams in front of a film-poster; old Jews passed in couples, whispering under their black hats; housewives carried string bags; an eighty-year-old hunchback sucked a clay pipe; the lees of wine stagnated in the bottoms of barrels; families lived crowded together in their dozens up the corkscrew staircases, where the rags hanging from the clothes-horses dripped all week and stone sinks belched their stale stench; rust gnawed at iron, mildew at stone, poverty at man; in the blind alleys where, one night five centuries ago, the Burgundians had murdered the Duc d'Orléans, these cheap trades were slowly murdering their human complement, allotting curvature of the spine to their apprentices, opening cavities in the lungs of their twenty-year-old workgirls, bringing cirrhosis to the publican and varicose veins to the housewife; a watchmaker, his forehead up against his shop window, his black glass to his eye, was fitting all the little wheels in the world together; and Lord Pemrose and Jean-Noël, exploring the quarter, were in search of the old houses of the nobility; the Hôtel de Sens, the Hôtel of the Ambassadors of Holland, the Hôtel de Lamoignon. They were following in the wake of phantom coaches.

One afternoon in the courtyard of the Hôtel de Lamoignon Basil Pemrose suddenly halted and stared at the ground. From a door on the ground floor someone had thrown out the contents of a basin of dish-water, and the grey, greasy fluid was running over the ground in little rivulets.

"That," said Basil Pemrose, "is the picture of our destiny. You and I are like little rivulets, not of clear water, but of an ancient water bearing the flotsam of the world's centuries, snaking through the dust

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without even mingling with it, designing their own sterile little geography to end in utter uselessness no one knows where. For me it doesn't matter; I'm an old man; but for you . . ."

He raised his eyes, sadly questioning, to Jean-Noël, who felt moved.

"Do you—how shall I put it—*feel* the presence of all these people round us," went on Lord Pemrose, "these little people who work and suffer and have never known anything but their poverty? The downfall of this old house moves us more than does their human downfall. I am aware of human misery, but I am also aware that I can do nothing about it, except sympathize with it a little and turn quickly away. Moreover, compassion is perhaps only the excuse we make for amusing ourselves with the picturesque. A happy world would not be picturesque. The picturesque practically always consists of dirt, rags and poverty."

"I don't feel any need to make excuses for myself," said Jean-Noël.

"Because you're only twenty, dear Jean-Noël," replied Pemrose. "Later on you'll find that one needs excuses. But we remain, nevertheless, the same isolated rivulets, carrying their own flotsam without mingling with the rest of the dust of the universe. However, that's neither here nor there," he added, as if he were suddenly ashamed of his own access of sensibility. "Nothing that happens to us is important enough to confide to others. Let's go!"

He put his arm through Jean-Noël's and then withdrew it at once with an air of embarrassment, like a man who has dared make a too-familiar gesture towards a woman he barely knows.

"I would like you to come and spend a week-end at the Abbey," said Pemrose. "It's a charming place, which I and two of my friends own in common. And I'd like my friends to meet you."

III

"*Normandie herbagère, éclatante et mouillée*," quoted the servant turning round in the front seat and, as it were, introducing the countryside to Jean-Noël.

And he added: "It's a line by Madame Delarue-Mardrus which the gentlemen often quote."

He had a slight foreign accent.

"What's your name?" Jean-Noël asked.

"Gugliemo. Gugliemo Bisanti, at your service, Monsieur le Baron. The gentlemen sometimes call me William. But I'm not Italian. I'm Swiss-Italian, from Lugano."

Jean-Noël had left the train at Bernay. There was nothing remarkable in their having sent a car to meet him; but it did surprise him a little that there were two servants in front, a chauffeur in livery and a manservant in a black coat, bowler hat and stick-up collar.

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He wondered whether it was to amuse the visitor that this literary manservant had been sent to do his turn.

The chauffeur was very young, twenty-five at most; he was handsome, dumb and mysterious, and wore a gold bracelet-watch on his wrist. Gugliemo, though it was difficult to determine his age precisely, must have been nearly fifty; he spoke with his eyes lowered, sat with his hands crossed in his sleeves like a priest, and when he took off his bowler hat he revealed an enormous, an excessive cranium, a sort of Byzantine cupola on which, from left to right, his few remaining grey hairs were carefully and individually arranged.

The landscape, divided by hedges, planted with willows and apple trees laden with little red apples, was strewn with thatched cottages. The car left the tarmac road and ran through narrow lanes of pale gravel; then passed through an old gate, whose hinges were lost among the leaves.

The château was a fine large house, an abbey of the period of Louis XIII, built in the best of French styles between the megalomania of François I and that of Louis XIV. Running loose in the park were Shetland ponies and a herd of three hinds and a stag.

Fifty yards from the house lay the ruins of the old church: a long section of ivy-covered wall, the lower portions of the arches of the vault, a huge window open to the sky thirty feet above the ground, and on the ground itself traces of foundations. The ruin had been transformed into a wonderful garden. Box edges, polyanthus roses and garden pinks filled the transept, the nave and the apse. Where the altar had stood were flaming golden marguerites. A shrub, sown doubtless by the wind, grew crookedly high up between two stones of the window. Huge blue convolvulus clung to the shafts of broken columns. And they had tea, lying in deck-chairs, above the gravestones of the old Cistercian abbots.

Lord Pemrose, Maxime de Bayos and Benvenuto Galbani, Jean-Noël's hosts, wore red, green or honey-coloured corduroy trousers, sandals with elaborate laces, their points revealing white and carefully tended toes, little gold medals about their necks and scarves loosely knotted within their open shirt-collars.

Lord Pemrose moved from chair to chair to avoid the sun.

"Christian, my dear, will you pour out tea?" said Prince Galbani, addressing a sickly looking young man with a dark hollow face and jutting cheek-bones, his forehead covered with a fringe of black hair.

The young man was wearing shorts; a thick, dark, abundant down covered his thin legs; he looked ill-naturedly at Jean-Noël, his eyes like two black coals. So much black on so weakly a body was curiously startling.

There were scones, buns and muffins, a huge old silver teapot, tiny spoons with handles ending in a little ball, sweet orange marmalade,

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bitter orange marmalade, creamy cakes, sponge cakes, cakes covered with preserved fruits into which one's teeth sank gently, glass finger-bowls within silver ones, the finest of linen napkins on which there was barely room to wipe the ends of one's fingers. Only the dark young man ate; the hot buttered toast, the tarts, the jams seemed all to have been made for him alone. The others contented themselves with a cup of tea, and Maxime de Bayos drank orangeade.

He put the glass close to his pale, fern-coloured shirt and asked them to admire the combination of colours.

"Too lovely for words," said Lord Pemrose, moving once again.

Jean-Noël, with the appetite of youth, helped himself to cakes, scones and muffins.

Prince Galbani sheltered his bald head under a silk parasol.

Two fantailed pigeons, cooing on the lawn, fell silent and then flew away with a great clatter of wings. One could watch, one could hear, so profound was the silence, a grasshopper jumping on a stone.

The Abbey itself, standing opposite the ruins, was separated from the village church only by a screen of trees, above which could be seen the tapering slates of the steeple. Children's voices, chorusing the responses to the catechism, gently emphasized the absolute peace of the countryside. Above the gravestones of the Cistercian abbots there reigned a casual, happy warmth, an unexpected yet complete harmony between the people and the place, between movement and colour, a secret accord compounded of innumerable constituents, which produced a quiet perfection, as the fusion of the colours in the spectrum produces light, which has no colour.

Time, the passing of time, the passage from second to second, had a palpable and beneficent quality that surprised Jean-Noël. Never before had he noticed that the present could in itself have so precise, so vital, so enchanting a reality.

And yet Jean-Noël did not feel perfectly at ease. Not only because of the glances of the dark young man, but because of the others, Maxime de Bayos and Prince Galbani with his parasol, who were also watching him with far greater politeness, even with smiles of approval, but who, nevertheless, stared at him unceasingly. They were secretly studying his features, watching the way he crossed his legs, put down his cup, answered a question. When Jean-Noël had his back to them, he felt their gaze on his neck; when he turned about he found their eyes noting the cut of his trousers or the colour of his socks.

Nor did Lord Pemrose seem perfectly at his ease. He was like a man introducing a new woman to his intimate friends, and concerned about their reactions.

"Basil, dearest, show your friend the house if he would care to see it, and his room," said Maxime de Bayos.

Then Bayos went off on some urgent business and his voice was

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heard calling: "Césaire! Will you put the sprinkler on the croquet lawn; we shall play no more today."

Lord Pemrose had already explained to Jean-Noël something of the organization of the Abbey; the young man got to understand it better during the course of his visit.

The three friends, Benvenuto Galbani, Basil Pemrose and Maxime de Bayos, who were called, and indeed called themselves, the "Three Bs"—Ben, Basil and Baba—which by a play on words became the "Three Bees," had combined to buy the house, gather in it their favourite possessions and lead there the life they liked.

"The old monks made no mistakes in choosing their sites. We have made a sort of monastery of friendship here," said Lord Pemrose smiling. "It is our refuge, where we try to make a happy life for ourselves. I was first great friends with Baba. He's a little younger than I am. We've known each other for, well, for something like thirty years. And then he got to know Ben" (and a shadow passed across Lord Pemrose's face as if at the memory of old sorrows and sufferings which one has sworn, long ago, never to mention again), "and then we all three became friends, and there it is . . ."

Lord Pemrose had given Gowen Castle, the house in England in which he no longer lived, to the National Trust. It was a huge Tudor fortress and there was a picture of it in one of the corridors of the Abbey. In the same corridor, which led to his room, Pemrose had amused himself by hanging photographs, postcard size, of his family portraits. There were some fifty of them: Bluebeard heads above ruffs and doublets, noblemen with wide hats and soft leather boots on prancing war-horses, beefy faces below tie-wigs, pink-and-white ladies painted by Gainsborough in their park, and boys in brocaded waistcoats, leaning casually on flint-locks, a greyhound at their feet.

Through these portraits one could follow the whole evolution of English society, the triumph of civilization over man's primitive instincts, merely by glancing from those heavy, sanguine, violent faces of the early eighteenth century, faces of drunken coachmen, from those fists of prizefighters, those beer-filled stomachs, those clumsy lechers, their fat thighs bursting from their white breeches, to end at Basil Pemrose, as he swept a lock of hair back from his forehead with a delicate gesture before his gallery of postcards.

"I've reduced my ancestors to the stature of our century," he said smiling.

Jean-Noël thought of Mauglaives, with its blue-ribanded Marshals on the walls.

At every step he took in this house he saw something to admire or marvel at. The best piece and the best picture seemed to have been selected from every style and painter. But the rare furniture, the

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masterly paintings, the chandeliers, the objects in gilt or tortoiseshell, the marbles, the candelabra, had all been arranged as if by a woman of impeccable taste with a great knowledge of the arts. The whole effect might have been pompous and intolerable; but in fact it was at once exquisite, calculated, livable-with and perfect.

And it must have been very difficult to decide, on any particular evening, whether they would dine off silver plate, *Compagnie des Indes*, or the service that had once belonged to the Bavarian Court.

Pemrose had warned Jean-Noël never to speak of the hereditary madness of the Bavarian royal family in front of Maxime de Bayos. Maxime was the product of an extraordinary mixture of blood. His ancestry was a succession of mysteries. He had unlikely cousins in every corner of the world, from Brazil to Denmark and from Ireland to Herzegovina. His mother, whose portraits he venerated as if they were holy icons, had died mad.

Though his health was delicate, it was he who undertook the essential duties of housekeeping. He was meticulous and would spend hours arranging little silver-gilt boxes ornamented with eagles. He knew by heart the ceremonial of courts and could recite the King's menu at the Petit Trianon. His knowledge of architecture, styles of furniture and porcelain was equal to Lord Pemrose's knowledge of literature.

As for the man with the parasol, Lord Pemrose explained: "We're all of very recent origin in Ben's eyes."

Whether one had, like Basil, three centuries of ancestors buried at Gowen, or, like the Schoudlers, had been Barons of the Holy Roman Empire for only eighty years, or one possessed, like Maxime de Bayos, though he bore no title himself, mysterious alliances, made little difference in the eyes of Prince Galbani.

For the Prince belonged to the oldest aristocracy in the world. His roots lay in the Roman Empire and even in mythology. The Galbani were descended, or asserted their descent, from the Emperor Galba who himself was descended, if Suetonius is to be believed, from Jupiter and Pasiphae. And they had been asserting this for so long that one would have had to go back to the fall of Ravenna to find anybody in a position to contradict them. Benvenuto counted among his ancestors one of Caesar's murderers. He bore on his arms the four nuts (galba, the soft-shelled nut). And in a general sort of way he spoke of the Roman Emperors as "My uncle Tiberius . . . my uncle Vitellius . . ."

The Galbani, throughout the Middle Ages, had fought with the Orsini and the Colonna for the mastery of Rome and the possession of the papacy. In fact Benvenuto drew most of his income from Sicilian mines, and he owned a number of palaces in Italy in which a whole government might have been accommodated.

He was the last of his illustrious race. After him the name would

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become extinct and his fortune pass to the Alcofrani, who were his nearest relations—that is to say, if she were still living, to the old Duchesse de Salvimonte. Benvenuto was not in the least concerned at being a full stop. “We have lasted long enough,” he would say.

During his tour of the house Jean-Noël met the huge, immensely tall Prince (he stood over six feet three and showed evident symptoms of pituitary deficiency), his arms laden with flowers. The heir to the Caesars did the flowers at the Abbey.

“And the young man?” Jean-Noël asked Lord Pemrose, alluding to the dark boy.

“That’s Christian, Christian Leluc, a young pianist of very great talent indeed. We’ll ask him to play tonight. It was Ben who discovered him. He’s twenty-four.”

As Jean-Noël looked surprised, Pemrose added: “Yes, I know, he looks as if he were seventeen. He’s charming, you’ll see. He’s a bit surprising at first, of course.”

Jean-Noël thought that it was a peculiar virtue of the Abbey to make people look younger than their age. The “Three Bees” had an air, in spite of the years, in spite of the centuries indeed, of eternal adolescence.

IV

On the table was a vase of wildflowers, doubtless picked by Jupiter’s descendant.

“The country, simplicity itself,” Pemrose had said to Jean-Noël when inviting him.

Gugliemo, unpacking Jean-Noël’s suitcase, had discovered that it contained no dinner-jacket. He appeared with a suit of freshly pressed evening clothes over his arm, and a piqué shirt, black tie and pumps.

“I think these would fit Monsieur le Baron very well.”

Gugliemo turned on the bath.

Since childhood, since the days when Miss Mabel had washed him, Jean-Noël had never had a servant to help him bathe. He felt very embarrassed at undressing in front of him; but as the man seemed to take it for granted he dared not tell him to go away.

Gugliemo contemplated Jean-Noël’s nakedness with a sort of easy deference.

Gugliemo was the kind of manservant who talks; it seemed that, in this house, it was his privilege to do so; in his own way he was a strange object, a unique sort of curiosity, and was lent to the guests for their appreciation.

“Is this the first time Monsieur le Baron has visited the Abbey? What peace, what a place for meditation!” he said as he soaped Jean-Noël’s back. “Particularly the ruins of the church. How moving they are! To be here, in these gentlemen’s service, allays my regrets a little.

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Monsieur will understand when I tell him that I had a vocation that was thwarted."

He fell silent for a moment, pressing the sponge between his hands.

"I wanted to be a Carthusian. Alas, the temptations of life!" he added.

Jean-Noël, his head sticking out of the water, stared at him in surprise.

"Yes, the influence of a good Father Superior was what I needed," Guglielmo went on. "Only, there it was, one foot in Montmartre, the other in the monasteries . . . If Monsieur would like to wash himself now . . . I always spend my holidays in Carthusian monasteries, even as far away as Burgos, where the libraries are heaven. I like reading; Monsieur le Baron will understand that, since he comes from a writing family. I've read all Monsieur de La Monnerie's poems. But I enjoy improper books too."

He had picked up the bath towel and was holding it against himself, his hands joined beneath his chin, head bowed, eyes lowered. With his great domed skull he looked more and more like some figure in a fresco.

"To tell you the truth, Monsieur, I'm a mixture of St Augustine and Oscar Wilde," he said emotionally. "But there, I'm talking and talking, boring Monsieur with all my nonsense."

He had wrapped the towel round Jean-Noël; he was rubbing him, slapping him, bending down to dry his knees. "Monsieur must forgive me, I'm old: fifty-two," he said plaintively.

He straightened up and looked at Jean-Noël enveloped in bath-towelling.

"Monsieur looks exactly like a young monk," he said smiling and blushing.

The pumps were a little large, but the dinner-jacket fitted perfectly. It was rather preciously tailored from a sort of green-black silk that made it more of a jewel-case than a suit.

As Jean-Noël left his room and started down the passage, he saw through an open door the dark young man, the counterfeit adolescent, who signed to him to come in.

Had he left the door open on purpose?

He was wearing a white coat, which emphasized the dark hollows of his cheeks and eyes, and the extraordinary black fringe that fell almost to his eyebrows.

Christian Leluc was wearing gloves, long mauve gloves, their tops folded back against his shirt-cuffs. He was gently, tenderly stroking the suède, his eyes on Jean-Noël.

"Aren't they pretty?" he said.

Jean-Noël saw him smile for the first time. His teeth were small, with gaps between them, the incisors pointed like canines.

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Jean-Noël's eyes were riveted on a half-open drawer in the chest-of-drawers where, heaped together, lay dozens of pairs of women's gloves in silk, leather and wool, evening gloves decorated with embroidery or sequins, old ladies' mittens, and pink, scalloped, cotton gloves such as servants wear at country dances. They were all new.

"Yes, I believe I've got the finest collection there is," said Christian Leluc.

He smiled dreamily, then, suddenly becoming serious again, tore off the mauve gloves, threw them into the drawer and said: "Come on, let's go down. The High Priests will be ready, and they don't like being kept waiting. One makes one's career as one can, doesn't one, old man?"

He slapped Jean-Noël on the back, which Jean-Noël found disagreeable.

V

They dined in the library which was the real centre of the life of the Abbey. It had been built two storeys high, but the first floor had been removed. It had therefore two rows of windows, one at the ordinary level, the other eighteen feet from the ground. Half the enormous room was lined with books ranged on shelves of rare woods, which were reached by corkscrew staircases.

The other half of the room was entirely covered with pictures, the Italian, French, English, German and Dutch schools hanging cheek by jowl from floor to ceiling. The profusion of bindings, busts, furniture and valuable objects of all kinds was unbelievable. But there reigned a perfect order over the whole. The hundred or hundred and fifty pictures were hung with a sure eye for symmetry and a perfect correspondence of colour. Ancient medals gleamed on the doors which had been transformed into tall display-cases. One whole section of the library was dedicated to dictionaries of the principal dead and living languages, to the history of the sciences, to technical encyclopaedias, and a similar section was devoted to musical scores, while the rarest of the illuminated manuscripts were displayed in the showcases in which Frederick II had kept his military maps. There was a collection of over a thousand gramophone records, including all the greatest works of the world, played by the best orchestras and virtuosi. There were both Liszt's concert piano repaired and remodelled by the house of Pleyel and the most modern and efficient of radio sets. On a desk that had belonged to Vergennes was the original architectural model for the steps of Santa Trinita del Monte. There were deep red-leather armchairs, in which the body rested so much at ease that the spirit was freed from the need to consider it; and when, from the depths of one of these chairs, you raised your eyes to the sills of the upper windows they came to rest on the busts of eight Roman emperors—

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Ben's family portraits—who crowned this sanctuary of wealth, art and rarity.

Nearer at hand Plato and Zeno of Elea, reposing on two columns, framed the marble chimneypiece.

There could be no other room like it in the world, and you would have had to go back to the Renaissance, to the period of the Medicis and Marsile Ficino, to discover a comparable spiritual state to that which had inspired the creation of this private Pantheon of culture.

All around slept the Norman countryside.

Of medium height, dark-skinned, his hair carefully parted in the centre and ending in a single point at the neck, Maxime de Bayos still had the features of a young man. But the skin of his face was slightly roughened and lined with tiny little crow's-feet, as if etched by a quivering hand with a steel pen. He smiled with his lips drawn tight across his teeth.

"He must dye his hair," thought Jean-Noël.

Prince Galbani's fresh-complexioned face, on the summit of his interminable body, had round blue eyes and no eyebrows. Age had not wrinkled it, but had made it slightly puffy. His mouth was thin and rose-coloured. On each side of his bald patch white hair, still thick above the temples, stood out like the wings of a dove. When he sat down his legs stretched across the room like a barricade.

Jean-Noël had never before seen four men sit down to dinner wearing valuable rings on their fingers, cameos, pearl-encrusted miniatures and curiously shaped gold seals.

He felt very under-dressed with only the simple signet-ring that had been taken a few years ago from the dead hand of his uncle, the diplomat.

"Somewhere or other there must be the big cornelian seal that belonged to Uncle Urbain; if I ever come back here I shall wear it."

He had never seen four men who wore their monograms embroidered in gold thread on the velvet toes of their slippers. Nor had he ever seen four people who took at dinner, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, such a variety of medicines, producing ancient comfit-boxes, little cases of chased gold, containing a green pill, a charcoal cachet, or a homeopathic granule.

"Christian, *caro*, you haven't forgotten your calcium?" Prince Galbani asked.

Christian had a special menu; he was served with a slice of calf's liver, very underdone, no doubt to set up his strength.

Maxime de Bayos ate no cauliflower *au gratin*. His cauliflowers were prepared separately; they were plain boiled and the butler sprinkled them with lemon-juice.

The conversation was lively and gay; Jean-Noël felt that the "Three Bees" were manufacturing their honey before him and for him.

Nevertheless, allusions to people and events of which he knew nothing were constantly passing over his head, and he had an irritating desire to know more about this closed world, that he might share in its perfidious joys.

When Inès Sandoval's name was mentioned, Pemrose's friends looked at each other with a slightly superior smile, which implied that they *knew* and disapproved, but with indulgence.

The port was passed round and Pem stretched himself out in one of the big leather armchairs.

Then Maxime de Bayos produced long thin cheroots, from which you withdrew a straw; "the cheroots," he said, "that George Sand used to smoke."

And then Prince Galbani went and sat in a corner, his long legs jutting from behind a circular frame, on which was stretched a canvas with all sorts of coloured wools hanging from it. The grand-nephew of the Caesars was engaged on *petit point* tapestry. At the moment he was making a chair-back on which three golden bees were in flight over ruins and blue convolvulus.

And the dark young man sat down at Liszt's piano.

The density of the air, the depths of space, the very quality of time itself were transformed, because genius had entered the room. There was genius in Christian's hands, and all the prejudice Jean-Noël felt against him fell away.

When at rest or making the ordinary motions of life, Christian's hands had nothing remarkable about them. They were thin, slender hands with bony fingers and rather short nails. But as soon as they touched the piano they acquired a beauty, a grace, a life, a purity even, that was surprising. They were isolated from the rest of the world; they seemed no longer to belong even to the body that bore them; they were independent and unique; they chased each other in a fantastic ballet up and down flights of ebony and ivory steps; they designed, effaced and redesigned pure forms, elongated ovolos and abstract scrolls, astounding in their novelty; they wove sonorous webs of sound, embroideries in which each flower was a single note; they created posies of music; they moulded strange shapes of resonance on invisible towers; they laughed, suffered and wept; they danced on the rhythms of Mozart in white stockings; they were wedded to the contours of Beethoven's deaf ears; they traced the interwoven symmetry of Vivaldi and of Bach; they brought down on the room the rain that pours behind the phrases of Berlioz.

They were using an instrument, a tool invented by man, drawing from it joys that lay beyond analysis and approached near to the imagination of God. They were the hands of civilized man within the most perfect setting of civilization.

And Jean-Noël realized this, in one of those moments when music,

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like alcohol or love, swells the surge of thought, bringing deep layers of consciousness to the surface. Without attempting to formulate it precisely, Jean-Noël was aware of the quality that made his hosts so rare and so exceptional. It was not only due to their having the material means, though these they possessed, for there were others as rich as they, but it lay in the employment of these means to braid the silken strands of human creation into the rope of their days.

These three elderly men, who had assembled all the rarest fruits of art and knowledge, were the last issue of the ten civilizations which they summarized; they created nothing; they were a sort of static apotheosis of everything that would disappear with them. Their existence was possible only in certain very special conditions of the world. They had reached the ultimate limit of sterile perfection that would lapse into the void.

Of this enclave among the Norman fields, an Englishman, an Italian and a Frenchman of mixed blood had made a synthesis of the gardens of Academus, the groves of Tusculum, the Glastonbury of Dunstan, the Cluny of the cathedrals, the Arno of the Quattrocento, the Loire of the Valois, of Versailles, of Ferney, of Montparnasse and of Bloomsbury.

Was it an illusion? Among these men Jean-Noël, though discovering each moment the paucity of his knowledge, felt, nevertheless, more intelligent, or at least desired to become so.

This assembly of philosopher-princes taught him that there were as many different degrees of quality in homosexual loves as there were in others, and that the difference resided less in the type of love one chose than in the way one conducted it.

Jean-Noël also thought of Guglielmo and of the young chauffeur with the gold bracelet-watch.

"All right," he thought, "but don't honourable bourgeois sleep with servant-girls? Don't ambassadors and judges follow shopgirls in the streets? Have I not picked up two whores on the pavement myself?"

These things seemed to him delicate and difficult to resolve; they were domains in which the dividing line between the admirable and the odious, the tolerable and the intolerable, the dignified and the ridiculous, the honourable and the shameful, was as thin and perilous as the blade of a knife.

At least in the "Three Bees" there was a natural, constant effort to achieve outward perfection and the higher satisfactions of the spirit which was not often to be met in women, however remarkable they might be.

The piano; Berlioz's rain pouring over the books, the pictures and the marbles . . .

And suddenly, though nothing had given Jean-Noël, as he watched the smoke of his cigar rising towards the distant ceiling, an inkling of so abrupt a change, Christian began singing in a shrill, false voice:

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*"Les gants de femme
Sont des fleurs parfumé-ê-e-s..."*

while playing a ridiculous song of 1900. He was laughing, showing his pointed teeth, and his hands, those same hands which a moment before had been imbued with genius, were drawing from the piano an idiotic tune whose old-fashioned rhythm, even in parody, could not conceal its vulgarity and bad taste.

Jean-Noël started up in his chair as if he had been awakened in the middle of a dream. The spell was broken; the knife-blade had been crossed and everything was slipping to the wrong side. Jean-Noël looked about him. The descendant of Jupiter and Pasiphae went on pulling at his multi-coloured wools in silence. Lord Pemrose gazed at Jean-Noël with tender, eloquent eyes that turned away whenever the boy's met his. Maxime de Bayos was tidying things. Christian repeated the refrain:

"Les gants de femme..."

And Jean-Noël recognized the same peculiar and alarming expression he had seen on his face before dinner in front of the open drawer.

Suddenly Prince Galbani pushed his frame aside. His blue eyes had a hard glint in them. He rapped on a little table beside him with his fingers and said in a loud voice that barely concealed his anger: "Christian, you should have more tact! It's going a little bit too far."

"Yes, my dear," said Pemrose in a tone of reproach, turning his head towards the piano, "I think Ben's perfectly right. You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

Christian had stopped, looking both sullen and satisfied, like a child caught out in a misdeed of which it is proud. And the three old men looked at him like sorrowful parents, their hearts heavy with reproaches.

Jean-Noël did not understand the basis of this family quarrel, and wondered to what extent his presence might be the cause of it.

"Forgive us," said Pemrose, seeing Jean-Noël's embarrassment. "But we think that Christian ought not to spoil his talent with such stupidities, don't you agree?"

Jean-Noël was not taken in by this reason invented on the spur of the moment; he caught the glances passing between Basil and Ben, Ben and Baba, and Baba and Christian which seemed to say: "We'll talk about all this tomorrow when we're alone."

Shortly afterwards Ben went away, looking immensely tall and without saying goodnight; the counterfeit adolescent followed.

"We always go to bed rather early," said Maxime de Bayos.

It was barely eleven; the house was perfectly still.

Lord Pemrose accompanied Jean-Noël to his room.

"Have you got everything you want? You have? You've been given a jug of fresh water?"

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Lord Pemrose looked round the room, pretending to make sure that nothing was lacking to his guest's comfort.

"A last cigarette, or do you want to go to bed at once?" he asked.

Vague apprehensions made Jean-Noël hesitate. Nevertheless, he accepted the little Turkish cigarette Pemrose offered him from an engraved case.

When the flame flared in front of Jean-Noël's eyes, Basil Pemrose again turned his glance away.

Then he sat sideways on the edge of a chair, his legs curled about each other.

"I expect you find us pretty strange, don't you?" he said.

"No, not at all," Jean-Noël replied. "I think you must be very happy people."

"Truly?" said Basil, emphasizing the question in a way that modified its meaning.

There was a moment's silence. Then he went on: "Yes indeed, we have a reasonably happy way of life, I think. Which does not mean to say that we are always happy in ourselves. Well, you know this house is open to you whenever you like, and nothing would give me greater pleasure than to see you here often."

He raised his eyes, the two fingers holding the cigarette were placed delicately against his temple. And Jean-Noël saw once again that expression of friendliness, tenderness and kindness that had touched him in the church at Madame de La Monnerie's funeral, and that reappeared from time to time.

But this time Jean-Noël felt anxious and troubled.

For Jean-Noël could now no longer ignore what it was all about, nor delude himself as to Lord Pemrose's intentions. Unless . . . "Unless," he thought, "he has no particular intentions towards me, merely a habit of being kind and charming to men."

There fell another, a more difficult, a heavier silence.

Why did Jean-Noël feel a sort of benumbing, morbid pleasure in playing with fire?

An insect flew into a lampshade. No, the silence could last no longer.

Jean-Noël forced a yawn, pretending at the same time to suppress it. Pemrose rose to his feet.

"Goodnight, dear Jean-Noël," he said, taking both his hands.

Jean-Noël left his hands in those of Pem.

"Goodnight, dear Basil," he replied, abolishing by the use of the Christian name, which he now uttered for the first time, the forty years that separated them. "And sweet dreams," he added.

He suddenly felt very sure of himself, and was amused at the act he was putting on.

Was Basil leaving his cigarette-case on the table on purpose? Would he come back for it in a few minutes?

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"Your cigarettes," said Jean-Noël, indicating the case with a smile.

"Keep it," Basil replied. "You may want a cigarette during the night . . ."

Then he took the gold case, put it in Jean-Noël's hand and said in a low voice: "Keep it, dearest; it's yours."

"No, really!" cried Jean-Noël, drawing back and blushing.

It was no longer a game, and he felt appallingly embarrassed.

"Yes, yes, as a souvenir of your first visit to the Abbey. It's a pleasure to me," said Basil.

He turned abruptly away and went out. There was no point in Jean-Noël's seeing that his eyes were misty.

With his supple, willowy step, his elbows bent, his knees brushing each other, Lord Pemrose moved down the long passages, wondering whether he had not let the unforgiving minute pass.

He cursed his shyness, the appalling, insurmountable shyness that had afflicted him all his life.

How greatly the pain, born in him the night of Inès Sandoval's Monster's Ball, had grown this evening, that pain shot through with hope which he could no longer do without.

VI

Lachaume asked Marie-Ange to dinner in the German pavilion at the Exhibition.

Above and around them the huge fair shone with a brilliant light, pushing the night away from its circumference. The Eiffel Tower stood like a mast of light and, from its first platform the voices of famous writers, monstrously amplified, poured out over the crowd the important speeches the Government had commissioned from them: "Hullo, hullo, Monsieur Edouard Wilner will now speak to you . . ."

A few hundred people, a tiny handful among the multitude, most of them utterly ignorant as to who Monsieur Edouard Wilner might be, raised their heads. Little electric cars carried the better-off visitors through the mob in comfort.

"France will always have the treasure of her arts and her friendships . . ." announced Wilner's enormous voice, as the loudspeakers transmitted his hoarse, colossal blast, like the breathing of Jupiter. "You, visitors from every country in the world, now enjoying yourselves here, think of the men of France who, through the centuries, have laid the foundations for your pleasures of today . . ."

And the crowd returned to their milling like an exhausted ant-heap. From the fun-fair came the shrill cries of women on the water-chute and the scenic railway. Floodlights shone on the marbles of the Palais de Chaillot. From every direction came the dulcet sounds of Cuban and Rumanian orchestras, of Arab and Malagasy bands, prospectuses

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from the pavilions, saying it with music. While on the Place du Trocadéro the flags of all the nations floated on the evening breeze as if knights from every corner of the world had planted their lances while they took their ease.

The restaurant of the German pavilion was one of the more elegant and expensive. The waiters fussed round Simon, who had got his secretary to reserve a table.

Simon wondered whether Marie-Ange's discreet, almost distant politeness concealed a certain hostility. It was quite on the cards that she might, as a child, have heard him spoken of as a fundamentally bad man, who had founded his career on treachery.

But he knew that prejudices can easily be dispelled when you happen to be a Minister and are talking to someone twenty-five years younger than yourself.

During the course of dinner Simon set himself out to dispel them. He talked of François Schoudler and of Jacqueline in terms that touched the girl. She had not expected such sensibility from him. Then he told his own version of the story of the crash; since all the principal actors in the affair were now dead, and there was no one to contradict him, he discovered an honesty of purpose that he had lacked at the time.

"How odd it is; there are people, indeed families, with whose destiny one's own seems to be linked, circles to which one's life appears to lead one back continually . . ."

He was thinking, as he said this, of his affair with Isabelle. "Does she know? Probably not. It happened more than fifteen years ago. And now here's her niece, and I'm dining with her. To think that there was once some question of my marrying Jacqueline, when she was a widow. And here's her daughter. After all, I can't be all that old, since these things surprise me and it's the first time they've happened to me!"

"You know I practically began my career by writing a book on your La Monnerie grandfather; it was my thesis for a doctorate. Have you read it?"

"No, I'm afraid I haven't," Marie-Ange said.

Whatever reasoning Simon might employ to persuade himself to the contrary, he nevertheless felt very old in the girl's presence.

"You seem to have retained a great affection for the members of my family," she said. "I must admit that, when I think how they ended up, and the circumstances in which they have left my brother and me, I haven't much opinion of them."

Simon then realized that the cold reserve she showed towards him was not based on the reasons he had imagined.

"It's simply that she doesn't like me, or that she can't imagine that a man of my age . . ."

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He chose expensive dishes and filled her glass with carefully selected wines. She ate and drank well, but remained perfectly calm.

"Are you in love, Marie-Ange, or have you been in love?" he asked.

"Oh, how pretty it is!" she cried pointing to the river. "They're like dresses of water dancing!"

The illuminated fountains had been set going on the Seine. The jets of water rose sixty foot into the air in a multi-coloured, changing light, to the accompaniment of electrically produced music.

"In love?" said Marie-Ange a moment later. "No, I don't think so, not properly."

"Really not? You must have lots of boys dancing attendance on you, particularly in your profession."

She shrugged her shoulders with indifference.

Simon came to the conclusion that she had not yet had a lover. Accustomed as he was to frank expression when speaking to women, on this occasion he avoided pressing his investigations further, just because she was a young girl and he was afraid of offending her.

"Do you have fun in life?" he asked.

"No, at least not at the moment, I mean at the present time," she replied.

Her brother had just left for Italy and she felt lonely.

"Don't you want to get married?"

"How stupid and boring my questions are. I really don't know how to set about it," he thought.

She pointed out to Simon a group of Scotsmen in kilts crossing the Pont d'Iéna. Then she said: "I don't know. Perhaps all women want to get married, even when they think they don't. But a girl brought up as I have been, making the demands one has been conditioned to make and with no money to justify them, is almost certain never to meet the man to suit her."

"Nonsense," Lachaume cried. "You nearly always get what you want if you try hard enough."

"Then I don't think I shall ever have anything, because there's nothing I passionately want."

They had finished dinner and went downstairs. Simon took Marie-Ange on a rapid tour of the gigantic Exhibition, explaining to her how it had all been built, telling her of the difficulties, the rivalries, the amusing stories, the conflicts of vanity. And the Exhibition looked quite different to Marie-Ange, because the Government point of view was being revealed to her. Simon avoided pedantry; he brought into play all his capacity for wit to amuse Marie-Ange, and felt really happy when he saw her laugh or smile.

He accompanied her as far as the door of the second-class hotel near the Champs Elysées, where she had been living since the sale of the family house. It did not occur to Simon to stroke her neck, touch her

knee or even take her hand during the journey. Simon's attitude at Inès's ball and the invitation to dine with him alone had put Marie-Ange on her guard, had made her suspect she might have to defend herself, but now she was almost surprised by his discretion.

"He's much more considerate than I thought," she told herself.

"I'm really very grateful for a lovely evening. I've enjoyed myself very much," she said.

Simon was touched by the almost childlike sincerity of her voice, particularly as she had not been very gay during dinner. And because she expressed gratitude to him, he felt a sense of generosity.

"Marie-Ange Schoudler," he said, giving her her surname so as to mingle a little irony with the seriousness of his words, "I would like you to know that in me you have a friend. I believe I did as much for your family in the old days as was within my power. But the members of your family were a great help to me, and indeed without them I shouldn't be where I am today. My friendship is almost a debt that I am carrying forward to you. Use it extensively. You have a large credit balance."

The car had stopped by a street-lamp that lit the interior. Simon's eyes met those of Marie-Ange and for the first time he saw in them an expression of real confidence. It lasted only a second, but it was very clear to him.

"In that case there's only one thing I shall ask: to see you again soon," she said.

There was no flirtatiousness in her voice, and they merely wished each other goodnight.

The next morning Simon found a copy of the already yellowing thesis in his library and sent it with an affectionate inscription to Marie-Ange. He dined with her five times during the next fortnight. It was holiday time. Simon, as well as being in charge of his own Ministry, was standing in for two other Ministers, before his own turn came for a few days' rest. But his evenings were fairly free.

On two occasions he even went to fetch Marie-Ange at the dress-makers', waiting in his car a few yards away from Germain's establishment. "That's how things are," he thought, "and I used to laugh at elderly Ministers waiting for little mannequins. Exactly what I'm doing now, in fact. Only, with Marie-Ange it's not the same. She's no ordinary mannequin. But haven't we all reasons for believing that our own particular case is different from other people's?"

He was making no amorous progress with Marie-Ange; on the contrary. He had made a false start and allowed a relationship to develop that in no way corresponded to his original intentions; and now it paralysed him.

Because she was the daughter of friends of his youth, he could not help thinking of her as a child. A little more and he would have been

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advising her not to read certain books; he avoided risqué stories in her presence. Because she had told him she had never been in love, also because it pleased him to believe it, he imagined she was still a virgin. And because she seemed to ask only friendship of him, he felt bound to justify her confidence.

"I've gone about it very badly," he thought. "A man like Wilner would never have acted as I have, or at least would never have done so at my age. A woman's a woman . . ." And he tried to reason with himself.

"After all, at twenty-three I was fighting the war. I was no longer a child. Very well, at twenty-three Marie-Ange is a woman and no longer a schoolgirl. And in the circles she moves in, doing the job she does . . . Well, it's all the more astonishing and admirable that she should be as pure as she is. It's the result of education, the heredity of the great families . . ."

As for Marie-Ange, she was finding more and more pleasure in being with Simon. Thanks to him, her feeling of loneliness during this late summer in Paris was lessened. She was surprised and flattered that so important a man should devote so much time to her and appear so pleased with her company. She talked little and knew how to listen intelligently, which was an inestimable boon to Simon, for men whose social function is to talk a great deal are incapable of being silent even in their private lives.

VII

Chalons-sur-Saône, Aix-en-Provence, San Remo, barges hooting in the morning for the lock-gates to open, the pink church at Tournus, the quays of Lyons, the famous restaurants in the Rhône valley, dusty Provence, the chirruping of cicadas, the plane-trees in the Cours Mirabeau, the pine-forests of the Var gently cooking in a scent of resin, the red rocks of the coast and a blue sea asleep beside a fringe of sand, the palms on the Promenade des Anglais, the Napoleon III façades of Monte Carlo—all these saw a strange turn-out in this early autumn, heading south down the classical road of illusions.

It was the time of year when most couples, whether disappointed with each other, surfeited with each other, marvelling at having found each other, or in despair at having to part, were going north towards winter, anxieties and dinner-parties in town.

Lord Pemrose's car was slipping down towards Italy against the stream. It was an old, black, silent Rolls Royce, with a high body and an engine that might have been put together by watchmakers. It was driven by Robert, the young chauffeur with the gold bracelet-watch, who wore a light-coloured livery so perfectly cut that, when he took off his cap, he seemed to be wearing a travelling-suit.

Beside him on the front seat was Guglielmo who, with his hands in

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his sleeves, his bowler hat, stiff collar and black coat, looked like an ecclesiastic on holiday from his diocese. He was giving a running commentary on the countryside.

Behind the dividing window, in the rear compartment, upholstered in beige cloth, among the brush-holders, the little boxes, the flasks, the embroidered hand-straps, the silk curtains, the light-switches and the movable arm-rests, sat Lord Pemrose and Jean-Noël.

In half a day's journey Pem had already succeeded in creating a sort of intimate chaos in the back of the car. It consisted of a mass of road-maps, among which the right one could never be found, works of scholarship, blocks of writing-paper, little cushions, trinkets and guides.

"People scoff at guides; it's absurd snobbery," he said. "On the pretext that elderly Englishwomen were ridiculous fifty years ago with their Baedekers in their hands, people now pass by the most splendid monuments without even knowing that they're there. The *Guides Bleus*, for instance, are marvellous. The only thing is that one must read them beforehand."

Pem had wanted the little silver corkscrew he kept in his jewel-case. Looking for it, he had dropped one of his pearl studs and crushed the mounting beneath his foot on the floor of the car. He had brought a plaid and a fur rug, which was quite useless at the time of year; it had to be shaken out at every halt as it gathered dust on the floor. How all the luggage was packed into the boot and on the roof was a mystery.

If Pem happened to see pretty-coloured wildflowers by the roadside, he stopped the car and, taking Jean-Noël with him, ran fifty yards back up the road, his knees knocking together, crying: "Oh, lovely! Too lovely for words!" Then he called to Gugliemo to find his pocket-knife with the mother-of-pearl handle, and returned to the glory-hole of the Rolls with an armful of eglantine or a branch of rowan; its pollen turned the upholstery yellow and its berries got squashed like the pearl stud. Once they found a four-leaved clover, and Pemrose gave it delicately to Jean-Noël with a slightly trembling hand, incapable of uttering a word. For the next two hours his face was slightly pink and he was living in a state of childish exaltation.

The people in the villages could not resist turning to gaze at this curious carriage that had a look both of an ambulance and of the berlin of romantic honeymoons, in which, conducted by two servants screwed to their seats, an old nobleman was abducting a young prince.

The same ceremonial took place at the end of every stage. Gugliemo went to make sure that the rooms engaged were ready and returned with a cohort of porters and commissionaires, while Robert began to take off the luggage. Pemrose would stop half-way up the steps to

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return, three times at least, to ask for a map or the guide for tomorrow's stage, neither of which could ever be found since they had slipped down behind the seat.

"And the flowers, my lord?" Gugliemo would ask.

Gugliemo loved saying "my lord" in front of the hotel staff. It made the little company's importance immediately clear.

Pemrose would make a vague, despairing gesture from the steps.

"It can't be helped," he would say; "they'll be withered by tomorrow."

Pemrose would enter the hall, his head turning questingly from side to side, his nose in the air, glancing at the pictures on the wall, and climb the stairs or allow himself to be taken up in the lift.

Basil's and Jean-Noël's rooms were always next to each other, if not communicating, and it might happen that they shared the same bathroom. They always warned each other when they were going to use it and never clashed. "There you are, my dear; the bathroom's yours," and a door would shut.

After dinner they went early to bed. There was always a moment of uncertainty in the passage, on the threshold of their rooms. Basil always seemed to have something to say that he could never express. Sometimes Jean-Noël would go into Basil's room, consult the guide-books with him, listen to a story, a commentary, a reminiscence concerning the countryside they were to cross. And then he would leave him, and the light would remain on a long time in Pemrose's room while Jean-Noël slept the sleep of youth.

When Jean-Noël came down the first morning, he asked for his bill at the desk.

"It's already been paid, Monsieur," the cashier replied.

"Dear Basil, you really can't do that," said Jean-Noël as he got into the car. "I can't allow it."

"Yes, yes, of course you can," replied Pemrose. "You'll wound me if you mention it. Besides, I never bother about things like that. Gugliemo does it all; it's so much simpler! Do as I do, don't think about it. Oh! Look at that ravishing old wall with the creeper! Too lovely!"

VIII

San Remo was only another Monte Carlo; Portofino seemed to be a replica of Saint Tropez; and the little villages strung along the road were no different at first sight from Saint-Paul-de-Vence, Grimaud or old Cagnes.

Jean-Noël had to await the revelation till they reached Lucca. But when they travelled down that road lined with rowan-trees, when they reached the high rose-coloured ramparts topped by enormous plane-trees like plumes on a crown, when they entered the little town with

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its thousands of green shutters against walls washed yellow-grey, when he saw the churches, the porches, each stone implicit with emotion, then he understood why so many successive generations had been determined to discover Italy for themselves, why after Byron, after Stendhal, after Musset and after a hundred others, his grandfather, who journeyed here with every new mistress, had consecrated part of his works to it, why his mother had spent her two honeymoons here, why Pemrose returned here every year, and why he, Jean-Noël, was here in his turn.

His joy was apparent in his expression and Basil was happy too, seeming to have received a transfusion of youth.

He was a marvellous guide. His faultless memory led them down the narrow streets. His was no voyage of discovery; he was remembering, recovering. His one discovery was the wonderment on Jean-Noël's face; it was another masterpiece he had the joy of creating.

Lucca, town of silence and peace. Pemrose and Jean-Noël went up on to the ramparts. They were so wide beneath their crown of planes that a tarred road had been built on them, encircling the town at roof-level. Basil and Jean-Noël strolled along this circular avenue looking over the plain. The Rolls followed silently at walking pace. Children were playing among the yellowing leaves and on the knolls to which ordnance had once been hauled. On a bench a boy of sixteen, with black curly hair, was clasping a girl beneath him. Pem and Jean-Noël pretended not to see the deep embrace in which this artless couple were absorbed, careless of exposing their love to sky, trees and passers-by.

Twilight was approaching. The sun, sinking in coral splendour, spread a rosy flush across the landscape, matching the bricks of the ramparts. A choir of adolescent voices could be heard through the windows of the old Instituto San Ponciano. The students of liturgical music were at their evening duties. From their unseen throats there rose, over the whole quarter of the town, a chanting that was not altogether of this world.

"Dear Jean-Noël," said Pemrose his voice very low and controlled, "I have never seen Lucca so beautiful. Remember this moment; when you have travelled much, you will still remember it as one of perfection. Perhaps it is because you are here that everything is so marvellous and the stones, the centuries, the light and the voices of those little priests seem to fuse together into a miracle." He looked away and took Jean-Noël's hand. He gently pressed the ends of his fingers as they walked on. Jean-Noël felt the pressure of Pem's ring.

And Tuscany opened its arms to them in autumn splendour, Tuscany where the shadows have hues unknown elsewhere, Tuscany where no single tree is out of place and every little house is like the temple of a minor god, Tuscany that for the Occident is the nearest approach to paradise.

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But to Jean-Noël's surprise Basil decided to avoid Florence. Jean-Noël, who had been enormously looking forward to it (if one could visit only one town in Italy, was not that the town to see?), did not conceal his disappointment.

"It's too silly to come all this way and miss Florence," he thought.

When he pressed the point, Basil, who was ordinarily so anxious to please him, became incomprehensibly obstinate, almost abrupt.

"Florence is as tiring as a museum," he said. "It's a store-house of genius. Beauty gains nothing by being crowded together as it is there; one trips over the miraculous. Besides, all those masterpieces are like St Peter's toe, worn by too many mouths. Too many eyes have rested on them. And among them there are certainly some that are far from beautiful, and one dares not say so. In Florence one loses one's independence of judgment. One becomes a client of the Medicis, and risks losing one's intellectual credit if one fails to show sufficient ecstasy."

Jean-Noël wondered what lay behind this explosion of temperament.

"Besides, Florence is a town that brings bad luck," Pem added.

It was as if he were in a hurry to leave even its neighbourhood.

They dined that evening at a roadside-inn, for Pemrose had decided to travel by night. And the inevitable violin and guitar, that appeared whenever they sat down to a meal in any corner of the peninsula, poured over their dinner a network of notes as acid as vinegar.

"One must beware of places where one has suffered, and return to them as little as possible; they have some quality fatal to one," said Pemrose.

"Dear Basil . . ."

Jean-Noël felt he was going to say something stupid and that, if the journey were to remain agreeable, he would do better to keep quiet. But he was carried away by curiosity.

"... why were you so unhappy in Florence?" he asked.

Basil Pemrose let fall the little piece of turkey fried in butter he had raised from his plate.

His face turned sad, that face of which Jean-Noël knew every little wrinkle, every hollow, every curve from nostril to eyelid, every quiver of ear and lip.

"My dear, my dear," said Pemrose, "I think I told you that I was great friends with Maxime, and that afterwards he got to know Benvenuto. It was in Florence that he met him, and then they went off together, and my mother was ill, and the whole thing was an awful, terrible drama, and I went almost mad among all those stones, pictures, churches and statues. There you are, it's quite simple really. It doesn't matter any more, because one can't bear a grudge for long against people one has really loved. Anyway I'm like that. Only," Pem went on, his voice quivering, apparently searching for something about his ear and then smoothing back his lock of hair with the tips of his fingers,

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and pausing for several seconds before daring to look at Jean-Noël, "only, I was afraid of suffering there again, dearest boy, because of you."

There, it was said; and Jean-Noël felt a slight chill between the shoulders, though he had known that this moment was bound to come and he had to admit that he had done nothing to prevent it. And the guitar and the violin were playing *Sole Mio* in honour of the two foreigners.

"Listen, Basil . . ." said Jean-Noël.

But there was nothing for Basil to listen to, because indeed Jean-Noël did not know what to say.

"No doubt," said Basil, "to you I must seem a ridiculous old man, and perhaps worse. To begin with, you like women. I also loved a woman when I was your age. There was no question of an unhappy love, but rather of a disgust for love."

Jean-Noël immediately thought of Inès. A disgust for love, was that his case too? He wondered whether there were not a sort of identity, a repetition, between his own fate and Pem's.

"Let's go to Assisi," Basil cried. "There, my dear, we shall find peace, Franciscan peace."

That night, at the bedroom door in their hotel, they hesitated even to say goodnight to each other.

IX

Alone, in the quiet of the dark church, under the vast vault with the four Giotto allegories, a Franciscan monk was playing the harmonium. He did not even turn his head between two pieces when he heard the sound of footsteps. He seemed to be there, in the basilica with its three superimposed sanctuaries, to keep the flame of music faintly burning, as the little red glass lamp feebly maintained its fire. The Chiesa Superiore lay deserted on its height, its doors had been closed behind the visitors, and the frescoes of the life of St Francis seemed about to fall asleep in their eternal freshness on its walls. And deserted was the crypt where, among the votive tablets behind the grille, the stone coffin was exposed with raised lid, that had once contained the saint's remains. And deserted was the nave apart from the monk, who seemed to be carved from a block of shadow, as he trod the bellows of his harmonium.

Pemrose sank on to a prie-Dieu. But he did not pray. He abandoned himself to the lacerations of the spirit. He knew now that he could no longer live without this boy, and he knew too that he could no longer continue to live beside him, at any rate like this. If he were separated from Jean-Noël for as much as an hour, Pem was assailed with a sort of glacial anguish, and could no longer maintain his serenity or his powers

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of reasoning. And when he was with the boy his mind was seized with an equal confusion, another agony. What should he do? Break it off or dare all, leave suddenly or . . . There was nothing to indicate with certainty that Jean-Noël would refuse. But to find out required a certain courage all the same. "I love him too much to try," Basil thought. And even if Jean-Noël consented, what would happen afterwards? Would his anguish disappear on that account? "He does not love me; he could never love me as I love him. Why should he? When one suffers at the beginning of a love-affair, it means that one will suffer throughout its course, whatever happens." And Basil knew that it was not in his nature to separate love from suffering.

So what was he to do? Take Jean-Noël to the nearest railway-station, buy him a ticket and say goodbye? No, that would be infamous, he had no right to do that to the boy. He had better give him the money to continue the journey alone, give him letters of introduction to his friends, even lend him the car and the chauffeur, let him amuse himself and be happy. But where was he to find the strength to do it?

Pem prayed for this strength in every oratory in the town, where there were twenty churches and every stone was a relic; he asked it of God, of the Virgin Mary, of St Francis and St Clare. At the evening office he had gone and knelt among the old women in black headscarves in the ancient temple of Minerva; he had gone to the Duomo; he had gone to the chapel of St Stephen that was like a tiny rose-red barn; he had gone to seek peace in the presence of the body of St Clare, that tiny skeleton on which the skin had grown hard in seven centuries, that thin, dry, black corpse, crowned with gold, wrapped in a coronation robe from which two tiny feet emerged like thin leaves of burnt parchment.

They had gone, Jean-Noël and he, to the cloister of Santo Damiani where the monks still decorated the place St Clare had occupied in the refectory with a bunch of country flowers. They had seen, under the window of the dormitory, the stone trough in which the Saint grew lilies, violets and roses, while blind Francis in the terraced garden composed his hymn to the sun.

In this village St Francis and St Clare were present everywhere in their extraordinary love, two celestial betrothed consuming their passion into the ashes of charity, two country lovers protecting themselves against their own desires by founding two monastic orders. And Pemrose wondered whether it were not possible to conceive of some similar quality of love between Jean-Noël and himself, a disincarnate love in which the exaltations of Heaven might replace the satisfactions of the body. He was prepared to locate Paradise, the Trinity, and all the saints in the calendar in this young man's face, and take the bread his fingers had touched for an eucharist. Pemrose was horrified by his own thoughts. He felt their sacrilege. He began to imagine the house in

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which they would live together, Jean-Noël dressed as a choirboy, himself a fervently adoring nun. Oh, the drama of being born into a Catholic family in a puritan country and to have the faith! Would not all these torments have been spared him if he had been a Protestant? He was going mad. The boy was making him lose his reason. The boy's entrance into his life was his tragedy and his damnation. It would have been better had Jean-Noël never been born. It would have been better to see his body crushed on the road. It would have been better to strangle him with his own hands. But could one strangle an angel?

The angel, sitting on a straw chair and listening to the harmonium, was bored. He was wondering what Marie-Ange was doing, but without anxiety. He thought Basil was really praying at rather too great length. He automatically felt for the gold lighter in his pocket. Pem had given it him to accompany the cigarette-case. He kept his fingers occupied feeling the ribbed surface.

A dozen monks entered and sat in a circle in the choir stalls for the evening office. A few dim lights were turned on above them. The harmonium fell silent. The monks talked among themselves in the low, indifferent voices of servants come to perform without fatigue the household chores of God.

"They are at peace, they are happy. Why cannot I be so?" thought Pemrose.

And then he felt the sudden illumination of his own salvation. A great, bright-light was in him and he knew it for the light of grace. He dared not yet formulate his thought, but he already knew its tenor and its aim. A strength other than his own, but with which his own was fused, dictated the longed-for resolution. Refuge, absolution, the redemption of a life of sin, of a life useless to mankind; peace, peace at last, in the contemplation of God; the passing of the hours in the tasks of a monastic rule; all these moved in his mind in a liberating glow, tongues of fire licking at his eyes, pyrotechnical suns against the vast background of the night of renunciation. This was the issue for which he was searching. He would go to confession that very night and ask for asylum in the monastery. He would enter it poor, stripped of his possessions, with no change of shirt, an exhausted pilgrim in search of rest. He would send the boy away, loading him with presents. Ah, the ways of Providence! If fate had not posted this boy, an unconscious guide, upon his path, he might never have found grace. He would leave the world without farewell. He would send instructions that his fortune be distributed to the poor. He began to organize his life of repentance and sanctity. "Lord Pemrose has taken Orders . . ." Either here or at Santo Damiani. A humble place at the end of the refectory, from where he might see the flowers of St Clare. And his delicate body would require no better food than the coarse soup. Providence was making his way plain.

He opened his eyes and was astonished to see that the church had grown dark. "When I remember this moment, whatever I do, I shall always see the church illuminated."

"Go back to the hotel," he said to Jean-Noël, "I'll join you there shortly . . ."—he paused for a moment—"perhaps," he added in a low voice, when Jean-Noël was far enough away to be out of earshot, and so as not to begin his life of holiness with a lie.

And he watched the messenger, with his fair hair and grey flannel suit, leave the church by a side-door.

"Thank you, Jean-Noël," Pemrose murmured. "You'll never know how much I owe you."

Pem was weeping. Huge tears flowed down the tired slopes of his face. But these were no tears of suffering.

Outside the day was dying. Driven onwards by a gentle breeze blowing through the Umbrian valleys, clouds were mounting slowly from the horizon in long transversal bands across the sky, their varied depths of shadow fusing into a deep violet. It was as if the ghosts of all the dead prelates were assembled in an advancing army, ponderous and impalpable, a huge heavenly crusade come to hold counsel and overwhelm the living. The old, dark olive trees seemed to prostrate themselves before its advance; for they grew with their trunks almost touching the hillside, their roots clutching the earth like so many hands, as Giotto painted them. Nothing had changed since then, neither on the hill nor in the little town that wars had spared.

Jean-Noël went back to the hotel, stood a moment at the window gazing out at the nebulous crusade, took a book and waited. The hours went by. Where was Pem? Still lost in his prayers? There really were days when Pem was a bore. But so splendid a journey was well worth it, as long as it did not become an organized pilgrimage. In that case one might as well have gone to Lourdes or Lisieux. A waiter knocked at the door and enquired whether they were coming down to dinner.

"I'm waiting for my friend," Jean-Noël said.

Another hour went by. Jean-Noël was becoming anxious. The fear that Pem might suddenly fall ill, which had already assailed him several times during the journey, now returned. He would be found in a dead faint in front of some reedos; or perhaps he had broken his leg on the staircase of a crypt. Jean-Noël did not see himself acting nurse in Assisi. After all, Pemrose had servants. If Pem had not returned in half an hour, he would send Guglielmo and Robert to look for him. Guglielmo was also relapsing into bigotry in this country. The waiter knocked again. The dining-room was about to close.

Jean-Noël went down to dinner. It was really no place to be alone in, and he felt anxious. Where on earth could Pem have got to? Each time the door opened Jean-Noël started, thinking to see him enter. But it was only a waiter carrying a dish.

At last, as ten o'clock was striking, Lord Pemrose appeared, pale, distracted, his tie crooked.

"I've been talking for a long time to the monks," he said. "But really they're too dirty. Revolting!"

He never told anyone that he had asked for the Prior, had half-told his story, had said that he wished to make a retreat and had besought him to make a cell available at once. And this, when the monks had held discussion, had been granted him. Pemrose had refused the food they brought him, had shut himself in his cell and lain down. Alas, there were bugs! He had been attacked by an army of bugs. Baffled, horrified, he had taken flight. He had had to awaken the monk in attendance, who had already gone to bed.

Their rooms, as always, were next to each other. Jean-Noël had gone up to bed, and after a few minutes no sound came from his room. Nevertheless, light still filtered from under the door. For two hours Pemrose fought this light, fought against the line of yellow that shone out across the floor in the silence. To master it, he forced himself to oppose it with the great bright glow that had filled him in the church. He recited snatches of the Hymn to the Sun. He called on every intimation of grace, Abraham's bush and Pascal's tears. But the line of light was still there, like a devilish Ariadne's thread, a golden serpent. Pemrose told himself that he would undertake a new work on the mystics; after the Italian mystics, the French mystics. It would be at once his penance and his release. It was an exercise that better suited his character.

He went to the door on tiptoe and put his ear to it. Not a sound. The boy must have fallen asleep, forgetting to switch off the bedside lamp. Pem entered the room, still struggling with himself, returned to the door, placed his forehead against it, pushed the door soundlessly to and gently turned the key in the lock.

Jean-Noël was fast asleep, and Pemrose could not resist going to the bed and gazing at that face, now so defencelessly delivered to his eyes. The lips were slightly pouting in sleep, offering their rosy flesh; the eyelashes shadowed the soft cheeks; the forehead was smooth as a bird's wing; each feature had its own still purity; while the lamp framed the exquisite mask in gold as it lay submerged in dreams and oblivion.

People's expressions asleep are often revealing. But Jean-Noël's face revealed nothing except a calm, empty, ineffectual beauty. And Pemrose knew himself a prisoner of this face, a slave to this admirable, deserted body.

He leaned down, his heart beating, and touched the sleeper's yellow hair with his lips.

Jean-Noël behaved like a child that does not want to wake up. He

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barely parted his eyelashes and turned over on his side with a slight grunt.

Basil took a pace backwards, switched out the light, let his dressing-gown fall from his shoulders and got into the bed.

If Jean-Noël still maintained the attitude of sleep, it could be no more than pretence. The sound of his breathing had altered, had lost the slow, even rhythm. Pemrose could hear the boy's heart beating.

And yet Jean-Noël had not started up in horror, as Pemrose had so greatly feared.

Pem passed his hands over the deliberately motionless body that manifested neither disgust nor desire, but seemed simply bent on silence and submission.

"I will teach him every pleasure," Pemrose thought.

It was an enormous joy to him that Jean-Noël had not refused him. "I'm still acceptable at my age to a quite young man." And so, at last, what he had wished for, waited for, longed for since Inès's ball with such violence that it was an agony, was coming to pass. "How much time I've wasted! How stupid I've been! Perhaps even from the very first day at the Abbey . . . But no, I regret nothing. It has all been marvellous. Perhaps the most wonderful love of my life."

And then, suddenly, Pemrose realized that he was incapable of taking advantage of the boy's submission. At first he thought it was merely a temporary weakness due to his overwhelming exaltation, and he forced himself to be calm. But the minutes passed and nothing happened. "What must the boy be thinking, what must he be thinking?" Pemrose wondered with growing anxiety and shame. "He attracts me, he attracts me more perhaps than anyone ever has before. Well then? Have I become so old that I can't manifest desire unless it's reciprocated?"

He sought help from old memories, distant images, but all in vain. "Beside him, should I need these things? And what of him? This is his first time, and perhaps he only consented so as not to hurt me. Who knows, this may disgust him for ever? I may be spoiling his whole life. What's happening to me is horrible, horrible!" He calculated. Months had passed since the "last time," without its having crossed his mind even that it was the last time. During his life Pem had often had long periods of chastity without his suffering from them or their causing him anxiety. But now, here was this boy beside him and the night was drawing on.

Jean-Noël's breathing resumed its deep, tranquil rhythm. The boy had gone to sleep again.

Pemrose thought of occasions when he had spoken jocularly "of the happy age of impotence." He was compelled to admit that that age had now come upon him.

"And now I shall have to live without it."

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For the second time within a few hours tears, do what he would to control them, poured from his eyes. Lying on his back beside the beautiful sleeping boy he spent his last night of love. A sleepless night.

X

When Simon was at last able to take a week's holiday, he decided to go to his constituency which he blamed himself for having neglected these last months. It was another way of checking and maintaining his power. Moreover, his principal private secretary was to stay in Paris and would telephone him every morning.

He asked Marie-Ange to go with him. He made a point of assuring her that he had no wish to compromise her. He told her that there would be other friends staying with him. And he spoke in good faith. He had invited a deputy, a member of his party, and his wife.

At Marcel Germain's work had slackened off; Marie-Ange accepted the invitation. And then, at the last moment, Simon's friends put him off.

The old Cardinal House, at Jeumont, which had become "Monsieur Lachaume's château" or the "Deputy's château," was a rather melancholy habitation. The decoration had little unity, having been inspired by different women—Inès, Marthe Bonnefoy, Sylvaine. The wallpaper, now nearly ten years old, was stained in places by damp, and though the caretakers aired the rooms regularly, there was white mould on the skirtings.

Only the library and Simon's bedroom, in the oldest part of the house—the big square block dating from the period of Henri IV—whose furnishings were due to Marthe, had any appearance of home comfort. A second crop of hay had been cut from the lawns. Dark shadows lay beneath the lime-avenues, and two stone benches crumbled away under the moss that covered them.

Simon liked the house, such as it was, with all its charm and inconveniences. He thought sometimes: "I must make up my mind to do it up." But he felt in no hurry to do so.

He gave Marie-Ange the room that had been Sylvaine's, a big room with three windows on the first floor. The bed was in an alcove. There was still a powder-box belonging to Sylvaine on the dressing-table, and the dust on the shelves in the cupboard smelt of scent.

When Marie-Ange saw the sort of hostile chill that lay over the house, she said to Simon: "May I go and pick some flowers in the garden?"

"Of course you may! The flowers are all yours. Go, by all means!"

And he said to the caretaker: "You see, Madame Jarousse, my guests point out to me that there are no flowers in the house. You ought to have seen to it."

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"But, Monsieur le Ministre only warns us of his coming by his arrival, as one might say. There isn't time to see to everything."

Half an hour later there were large bunches in all the vases.

"That's very pretty, very pretty!" Simon cried.

And he thought: "The truth is I haven't bothered about the house for five years because Sylvaine didn't like it. She only liked the Normandy at Deauville or the Carlton at Cannes: Marie-Ange is really charming to have about the place. She's simple, restful, and has taste."

Simon had promised himself to rest, to lie about in the garden and see no one for at least four days.

But he had hardly finished luncheon when the Mayor arrived to discuss the affairs of the town, political gossip, and the question of repairing a bridge about which there was some difficulty with the Préfecture.

"Very well, I'll telephone the Préfet," Simon said, "and ask him to luncheon tomorrow or the day after."

And then he suddenly felt a desire for activity. He wanted to look round his estate, see how far the building of the corn-silo, some six kilometres away, had got, and pay a visit of condolence to one of his election agents whose father had just died.

Simon dressed no differently in the country. He still wore his town clothes, black shoes and grey hat. The only difference was that he drove the car himself.

The first day he took Marie-Ange with him.

"I must ask you to wait five minutes while I have a word with Vernier, whose father's died. And then we'll go and look at the silo."

Marie-Ange marvelled that this man, who occupied one of the highest rungs on the ladder of power, should be concerned with little local interests, as if he were a town councillor in a small town.

As soon as the car stopped, Marie-Ange saw people looking out of their doorways. Two or three men came up.

"Good afternoon, Monsieur le Député. Good afternoon, Monsieur Lachaume. Good afternoon, Monsieur le Ministre. Indeed we were just saying: 'It's a long time since we've seen our Minister. Is he likely to be coming down soon?' The fact is, we chaps down here need him. The people in Paris can do without him for a bit."

They took off their hats or caps, put them on again, took them off again. Some of them bowed humbly; others stood upright, putting on an air of assurance to make it clear that they were intimate with Simon. And every one of them drew him apart and had something to whisper in his ear.

"Yes, yes, I've seen to it," Simon would reply. "Very well then, come and talk to me about it one of these days. That's it, ring me up the day after tomorrow. All right, drop me a line, my office will attend to it. Ah, there's my friend Masurel, that's the chap!"

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And he jovially tapped the stomach of an enormous butcher who now came up, his apron tucked on his hip, wiping his moustache with the back of his hand.

Marie-Ange, thinking of what Simon was like in Paris, in a salon or a restaurant, was astonished at the ease with which, for the benefit of his constituents, he was suddenly able to assume, like some great actor changing his part, a tone of voice which was at once hail-fellow-well-met and yet had a touch of superiority, as well as certain local inflexions.

As they drove into the village of Mureaux, Simon slowed the car almost to a walking-pace, and said: "You know, this is where I was born, Marie-Ange. There, in that hovel."

Simon never thought of his parents. Their memory—though the death of his mother, stifled by her new stays, had not taken place so many years ago—had, as it were, broken loose from his memory, as the dead cells from his skin were left each day on his bath-towel. If he sometimes thought of his childhood, it was only to measure the distance run, and assure himself that his pride might be well satisfied with it.

Time itself had undertaken to alter this, his first landscape, and place a distance between them. The house in Mureaux had been sold to some Paris business people, who had made a country cottage of it, with alterations, repainting and flowers. There were flounced curtains at the windows and red climbing roses on the walls.

Simon no longer thought of the house as the sordid farm with peeling roughcast that had sheltered his poverty-stricken youth, but as a simple, clean, moving façade, that one day no doubt would bear a commemorative tablet saying:

Here on the 12th October 1887 was born

SIMON LACHAUME,

French statesman.

And perhaps, on the square, in front of the combined Mairie and school, would stand his statue.

Suddenly Simon regretted having no son to whom he could bequeath all this, bequeath his legend.

"I shall grow old all alone, without anyone to carry on the tradition. And yet, that is how it should be. A man in public life should be celibate."

And he suddenly heard himself ask: "Do you want to have children, Marie-Ange?"

She had just seen a signpost which said: "Chantou-Mauglaives: 16 kms."

"Oh," she cried, "I didn't know Mauglaives was so close. I'd love to spend a day there if you have the time."

"We'll go there at once if you like. I don't know Mauglaives, you know, absurd though it may seem. I've seen no more of it than the roof from the main road. It would amuse me to go there."

They reached Mauglaives as night was falling. The huge château, all its windows closed, rose above the village. A storm, the previous autumn, had blown down two huge elms whose trunks lay in the old moat.

Laverdure and his wife came out of their cottage and rushed in astonishment to Marie-Ange.

"Mademoiselle! Well, really! Mademoiselle's here! What a surprise! Mademoiselle really mustn't look at us in the state we're in. Go and change your cap, Papa," cried Léontine Laverdure.

She was swarthy and shabby, and her eyes blinked with tears.

Marie-Ange and Lachaume did a tour of the château. The old huntsman, who now did duty as caretaker and bailiff, accompanied them. Everything was rusty, rotten and decayed. Grass grew in the courtyard right up to the steps.

"Of course, with only Léontine and me, we can't manage to keep things up and Mademoiselle must excuse us," said Laverdure. "I weeded all this last spring, but it's as bad as if I'd done nothing at all. We've done our best to look after the inside as well as we could. I wrote to Monsieur Jean-Noël about selling the two fallen elms, but he hasn't answered."

As he passed under the balcony from which he had thrown Jacqueline's body, the old huntsman doffed his cap.

"It's really a very beautiful place," said Lachaume.

"Won't Mademoiselle and Monsieur Jean-Noël reopen Mauglaives one of these days?" Laverdure asked. "Oh yes, I know there's a lot of work to be done."

"My poor Laverdure," said Marie-Ange, "to do that either I or my brother will have to marry someone very rich."

"Oh, it may happen, it may well happen; Mademoiselle certainly deserves it. Is it true that Mademoiselle is now working in Paris?"

"Yes it is, Laverdure."

"What a pity! Does Mademoiselle want to see inside?"

"No, I haven't time. I'll come back again," Marie-Ange replied.

She was in despair and blamed herself for having come. "Why, why did I want to see all this again," she thought, "the empty kennels, the empty outhouses, the silence? What a mockery to be the owner of an historic château and to have to work as a mannequin!"

"What shall I do about the two elms?" Laverdure asked.

"You must sell them of course."

"There is also Commandeur, Monsieur le Comte De Voos's old horse," said Laverdure reluctantly. "There he is, doing nothing at all. Now that there are no longer any hounds..."

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"Sell him too," said Marie-Ange. "I'm sure my brother will never want to ride again."

Laverdure gave Marie-Ange a quick glance from his little grey eyes and immediately lowered them again.

Marie-Ange opened her bag.

"I would like you to have Masses said for my father and my mother."

"They are said, regularly, Mademoiselle, on the anniversaries of their births and deaths and on their name-days. And the same is done for the late Monsieur le Marquis."

"But you've never put that in your accounts, Laverdure?"

"Oh, Mademoiselle shouldn't do that," said the old huntsman, as Marie-Ange slipped a note into his hand.

On the return journey Marie-Ange sat for a long time without speaking.

"I don't think I have a maternal instinct," she said suddenly.

"Why do you say that?" Simon asked.

"Because you asked me a question a little while ago."

It was Simon's turn to be silent. Then he said: "Why don't you have Mauglaives scheduled as an ancient monument? I could look after that if you wish it. It's absurd to let it fall into ruin."

She made no reply. He felt she was wiping her eyes.

"Marie-Ange, my dear Marie-Ange, are you so very sad?" he cried.

Without letting go of the wheel, he pulled her head towards him and kissed her hair.

XI

Never had Marie-Ange felt so alone, so orphaned, as in the room where lay the box of powder forgotten by another woman. At night the dark limes and an owl hooting ceaselessly created an atmosphere of melancholy and hostility about the house. The fireplace seemed to offer an entrance to all evil things; the two brass balls of the fire-dogs glowed dimly in the shadows.

Marie-Ange switched on her bedside lamp. A bat flew in at the open window and circled the alcove.

"If I put the light out it'll go away," Marie-Ange thought. She turned the switch and was once again in the dark. The night was warm and mild and yet she shivered.

"Why did I come here, and why did I go to Mauglaives? I can give no one happiness, and no one can give me happiness. Even Jean-Noël doesn't need me. How alone I am, how alone. Why did I come into the world to have so little happiness?"

She would have liked to be able to cry, to be able to sleep and be warm, she would have liked to feel the arms of a man about her, the arms of her father, the arms of her brother, feel the mass of a body belonging to the same human family between herself and a hostile universe.

It seemed as if her limbs were shrinking between the sheets, as if her very existence were diminished, pared down within narrow limits, as if her whole being could be held in the hollow of a hand. Had she fallen asleep for a moment? She threw the bedclothes back and sat up, her heart beating, her temples clasped in a vice.

"I'm unhappy, I'm too unhappy here. But I can't go and wake Lachaume and tell him I want to leave."

In the library Simon, his tie undone, his feet in blue leather slippers, was working, or rather believed himself to be on the point of working. He had brought several important files from Paris and a number of political reviews he wanted to read. But tonight he had opened the file that contained his *Thoughts on Power*.

He was composing the book little by little, pouring into it everything he could not say in his speeches. It would be another card in his hand if one day, when there was nothing else to wish for, he should happen to want to become a member of the Academy. "I thought I needed a rest," he told himself. "But as it happens I've never felt my mind so fresh and active. That girl being here makes me want to write, that's a fact. Hers is a beneficent presence. What's more, she likes the house. She showed it at once; she did the flowers."

He looked at the bunch of irises and daisies on his desk.

"During the next week I shall finish my book. Yes, and why shouldn't I marry her? Of course our difference in age might seem rather absurd. But incidentally it's due to her that I finally broke it off with Sylvaine. Without knowing it she has done me a good turn; she'll continue to do me good turns. Nothing can happen to me through her that is not good."

And he set about correcting his last maxims on the subject of nations being dragged down to their death by the weight of their armaments.

Suddenly he saw he had written on a blank page, almost unconsciously, words that had begun to chime in his head.

*Elle a des yeux très bleus,
Et juste l'ironie qu'il faut à la lumière.
Entre nos deux regards il n'est pas de frontière . . .
Les peuples pourraient être heureux.*

"How many years since I last wrote poetry, since I even thought of writing it? It's incredible," he thought. "In the first place her eyes are not 'very blue,' they're blue-green . . ."

There was a knock at the door and Marie-Ange came in, wrapped in a dressing-gown. Simon instinctively covered the sheet of paper on which he had been writing.

"What's the matter, Marie-Ange; are you looking for something?"

"No, no," she replied. "A book perhaps, if I may take one. I saw a light in here."

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She was pale, her features curiously contracted.

"Aren't you feeling well?"

"Not very, but it's nothing, it'll pass."

"Is there anything I can do? Is there anything you want?"

"Just to stay here a moment, if I'm not disturbing you. I'm sorry."

She sat down on a sofa, knees together, shoulders hunched, forehead in her hands. Her chestnut hair spilled over her fingers.

Simon watched her. "What's the matter? Some sorrow you've not told me about?" he asked.

She made no reply and sat in the same attitude for some time.

"It's appalling, appalling to feel oneself so utterly alone," she said at last. "But never, never has it happened to me before not to be able to hide it. This is the first time, I swear it, and I'm sorry."

Simon was happily surprised. "So that's it, that's why she's here; and I've been so timid, haven't dared . . ."

Marie-Ange's appearance, her words, the tears she was trying to conceal, which he took to be the nervous reaction of modesty, and her "this is the first time, I swear it," which he interpreted as his pride dictated, all combined to amaze him.

"But you're no longer alone, Marie-Ange darling, you know that," he said, his voice rather subdued as he took her by the shoulders.

She raised her eyes and suddenly realized that he was completely mistaken both as to her presence and her words. But how was she to disabuse him? Appearances were against her.

Simon's hands weighed on her shoulders more heavily still. She was herself responsible for the misunderstanding. If she bluntly refused him now, he would think her mad, perverse, or half-witted. Simon was standing in front of her, close to her, with his tie hanging loose and his blue slippers. There was no longer any question of thinking of him in terms of beauty or ugliness. Seen thus, from the level of his stomach, he was monstrous; he was an opaque and heavy mass, charged with latent power.

She had wanted the security of a human presence; but the presence of a man had always to be paid for thus.

She very quickly saw all that might happen, a struggle, wounding words, the destruction of a friendship that meant a lot to her, merely to find herself more lonely yet, back in that room where the fire-dogs gleamed like witches' crystal balls.

"After all I owe nobody anything. No one bothers about me. Mau-glaives will never be opened again. Jean-Noël is in Italy and, indeed, with whom!"

When Simon pushed her down on the sofa, she let herself drift with the current, as if she were drowned. She made no attempt at rebellion as Simon half-expected. She merely raised herself a little on her

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shoulders; but it was only to slip her pyjama-trousers down her thighs.

Because she hoped for nothing from this embrace, because her nerves were shattered, because she had no expectation of a pleasure that, until then, had been denied her by the mere fact of awaiting it, and also because Simon had long experience of the act of love, Marie-Ange knew that night what she had looked for vainly with other men.

She met physical pleasure as one meets death, by chance or through inadvertence, by throwing oneself beneath an unknown vehicle or being hit by an invisible projectile. It created in her a similar disturbance, a similar sensation of bursting in the head. She did not know that it was she who uttered the long cry of one healed by a miracle that shattered the silence of the house, till Simon fearfully placed his hand over her mouth. She raised her head, her eyes huge and wild, and then fell back, wondering if she would ever be cured of this marvellous ill, and whether her frenzied heart would ever resume its place in her breast.

"I'm not frigid, now I know I'm not frigid. But why with him?" she wondered.

And Simon, on his side, was thinking: "She was not a virgin. And why should she have been? How incredibly fatuous of me to imagine that a young girl should have an irresistible longing to be deflowered by me, because of the attractiveness of my fifty years, my pot-belly and my frog-like head! It's wonderful enough that a young, fresh body should want me at all. No doubt I owe it to the fact that I'm a Minister."

He managed to hide his disappointment; but the next morning, when he sat down to his desk, he tore the four lines he had written the evening before into little pieces and threw them into the wastepaper basket with a shrug of the shoulders. "It's ridiculous writing such foolishness at my age."

Marie-Ange was singing as she came downstairs. When she saw him, she made a movement towards him as if to kiss him. And then stopped short, somewhat embarrassed. He rubbed her neck with his forefinger and said: "Are you all right, my child?"

He looked less contented than he had done the evening before. "Did I fail to please him?" she wondered.

In the afternoon he went off in his car, alone this time, on a tour of his constituency. He came back at dinner-time in excellent humour. He had done a good day's work among his constituents, and during it had forgotten Marie-Ange. He felt really happy at finding her there, sitting on the sofa, her legs curled under her, a book in her hand. There were double the number of flowers in the room.

"How delightful it is to have her here, to be welcomed by that smile, that charm of movement, that good humour."

That night he went to her room, which had been Inès's, Marthe's

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and Sylvaine's. Now Marie-Ange was no longer frightened of the owls, the bats and the balls on the fire-dogs in the hearth. Forewarned, her cry did not shatter the air. But once again she experienced, as she clung to Simon's shoulders, the explosion of the nerves and the felicity which were, she now knew, the only remedy for loneliness, as food and water are the natural remedies for hunger and thirst.

And Simon went to sleep beside her, while she gently stroked, surprised at her pleasure in it, the bald forehead of this monstrous child, of this fat snoring animal, immured in its sleep. "Can one be so ugly, and yet so talented in all things?" she wondered with a sort of amused gratitude. "With a talent even for sleep."

And the next day he laid on her the responsibility of ordering luncheon for the Préfet, and of choosing wallpapers from the patterns brought by the decorator for the rooms to be done up.

"I'm wrong, I'm wrong," Simon thought, "to give her a place in my life so soon. I'll be wrong to let her take up more room in it than I wish; wrong if I attach myself to her, and she does not attach herself to me. Do I really want to keep her?"

And so the week went by in tranquil happiness. But Marie-Ange sensed in Simon a sort of latent misgiving.

"And if he asked me to marry him?" she wondered. "I really don't know what I would answer. No, it would be folly. Twenty-six years between us."

The last night, when they were together in the library, Simon said suddenly: "Marie-Ange, I've got something to ask you. I don't know if I have the right to do so and I don't want to compel you to answer."

She felt the blood mount to her cheeks and avoided raising her eyes to him. Simon hesitated before going on.

"Shall I say yes, shall I say no?" Marie-Ange was wondering. "I may easily say the exact opposite of what I want. I really don't know what I do want. This is a very important moment. And yet it's the moment I've been expecting."

"Marie-Ange," said Simon, "I'd like to know how many lovers you have had?"

She raised her head in astonishment, and was even more astonished at the sight of Simon's expression. It was the first time she had seen the face of jealousy, its features falsely calm, its aspect of heavy concentration, its suspicious eyes and air of impassive cruelty.

"Many?" he said.

"I suppose, I suppose," she thought, "that I should have expected this rather than an offer of marriage."

She got to her feet, went and picked up a flower that had fallen from a vase and replaced it.

"It seems you need time to count them," Simon went on.

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Marie-Ange shrugged her shoulders.

"Oh no," she said, "I was merely wondering why you were asking me that question."

"Because I want to know," he said.

In the bottom of his heart he was hoping that she would reply: "There has only been one man before you."

He came back to the charge by another road.

"At what age did you begin to make love?" he asked.

"Not very long ago. At twenty," she said.

Until this moment it had never occurred to Marie-Ange that she would have to render an account to anyone; and now she suddenly realized that she was going to be compelled to render one, with no logical reason, but simply because she was face to face with someone stronger than herself. There was a sort of threat underlying Simon's curiosity. "If I refuse to answer he'll grow angry." She felt that he had an advantage over her, and that she was dependent on him. It was the ransom due for having been saved from loneliness.

"And who was he?"

"Who?"

"Your lover?"

She still hesitated, but then, seeing that there was no way of escape from the inquisition, she said: "After all, if it interests you why should I conceal it? It was one of my distant cousins, François de Laubrières. I thought it absurd to be still a virgin at twenty. I wanted to know; I liked him well enough; and there it was."

"How long did this adventure last?"

"Four or five months. We saw each other from time to time, there was nothing regular about it."

"And after that?"

Since she had begun to talk, there was no longer any reason to stop. She mentioned, in the same curt, cold way, a boy who worked in public relations and had gone abroad, and then an idle young man in the American Embassy, and then a tennis-player whom she had known during the last holidays.

"And the tennis champion, how long did that last?"

"It didn't last," she said. "It was just one night."

She had spoken calmly and naturally. But she was being tortured. She had never imagined, when she had had a vague feeling that she was committing a fault with those men, that the punishment would take this form. She noticed that with every name she mentioned Simon automatically put out a finger as if counting.

"And then?"

There was a glint of anger and hatred in Marie-Ange's eyes.

"And then?" Simon insisted.

"And then there was you."

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For a while there was silence between them, as Simon sat with his four fingers extended on his knee. The usual owl hooted in the garden.

At that moment Marie-Ange hated Simon; she hated him above all because she could not assert that even one of the adventures to which she had admitted was a real love.

And she did not say the one thing that could have modified or lessened Simon's disillusion, which was that she had had with him what she had never experienced before.

"I expect you despise me very much," she said.

"I have neither reason nor right to," Simon said. "If I despised you for having slept with those men, I should have to despise you also for having slept with me."

This was indisputable logic, but purely intellectual, and Simon did not really believe it.

"There's no doubt," said Marie-Ange, "that according to my mother's or my grandmother's morality I'm a very bad girl. But compared to some people of my generation, people I know well, I'm only very moderately dissolute."

"Of course everything is relative, and everyone lives as best he can," Simon said.

And putting off more precise questions to some other occasion, doubtful even if there would be an "other occasion," he added: "Good-night, Marie-Ange, you've given me a good lesson. It'll teach me to go on being naïve at nearly fifty. In any case I can but admire your frankness."

Marie-Ange realized that her inquisitor was suffering. When she had gone up to her room and undressed, she waited for him for a long time. When she was certain that he would not come that night, she gave way at last to the tears she had restrained ever since the beginning of the conversation.

"I ought to have lied, I ought to have kept silent. Simon is so kind to me. I feel about Simon as I have never felt about anyone else and I've hurt him because of all that. I didn't realize that one's actions could one day hurt someone whom one did not know when one committed them. And that one would want to efface them and be unable to do so."

She felt like going downstairs, going to him and telling him this, her forehead against his knees. And then saying: "I loved none of them. I had no pleasure with any of them, and you are the first . . ."

And she suddenly thought that this man for whom she was crying had been the lover of dozens of women of whom some were famous, some notorious; that she had seen him choosing a dress for his mistress; that he told her nothing of his own life; and that there was still a box of powder in her room. Her tears ceased at once and, sitting

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stiff and upright, her eyes wide open in the night, she began to elaborate a new form of suffering for herself.

Meanwhile Simon, in the big armchair in the library, was thinking: "The fifth. I'm the fifth. I had hoped for a girl who was pure and undefiled. She has already had four men, and they were certainly younger and better-looking than I am. A tennis champion. And the day a sixth pleases her, tomorrow or in a week's time, she'll take him. She finds pleasure with me. But it's mere chance, and she probably finds it with no matter whom. Besides, if I really wanted a girl who was pure and undefiled, I need only have looked for some silly chit in this neighbourhood, divorced Yvonne, and married her. And she would have been as dull as a wet day, and have deceived me at the first opportunity like anyone else. Very well, Simon, you must make up your mind what you do want. I've taken the easy way. After all, a girl who's a mannequin, even if it does so happen that she comes of a good family, is really not engaged for her chastity. In any case, by what right do I set myself up as a judge? In that bed she's sleeping in she's rubbing shoulders with half Paris."

He vaguely passed in review the women he had had during the last thirty years. The principal faces emerged, but he knew that he was forgetting many of all kinds. And which of those women was not despicable on one count or another?

He was compelled to recognize that, if the fact that Marie-Ange had had lovers made him suffer, it was because he loved her, and for no other reason. "And supposing I had paid some attention to the young Schoudlers after the crash, if I had told myself that there were two children without father or mother, who to some extent owed their ruin to me, while I owed my career to their family, perhaps things would have turned out differently, perhaps I should have known Marie-Ange earlier and should not now be sitting here with my four fingers stuck out stupidly like so many knives."

He told himself that he must stop this adventure at once because he was putting too much of himself into it, and he would suffer as a result.

"She'll become essential to me, and then it'll be essential to me that she's happy. And I shall be terribly unhappy the day she leaves me."

But he already knew he would not give her up and that he would compromise with fate. Until Sylvaine he had always had the advantage over his mistresses. With Sylvaine things had been played out on an equal footing. With Marie-Ange it would be she who had the advantage. The best he could do was to conceal it from her as long as possible.

"I've now reached the age of suffering," Simon thought. "I've reached that time of life when the recollection of old loves poisons the

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new, when each of one's actions carries the mark and weight of one's previous decisions, the age at which one suffers not only from the harm one has done but from the happiness one has had, at which success itself become an impediment, at which one's foot is twisted in the ruts one has made oneself, the time when one must recognize that joys will never be new but only physical pain and mental torture, which are the landmarks in the slow progress towards decay and death."

And he automatically wrote these things down in the form of maxims that had, he knew, nothing whatever to do with power.

"It's the age when one longs to miss nothing," he thought. "How lucky youth is!"

XII

Lord Pemrose and Jean-Noël arrived in Venice by night. The car followed the long causeway which, coming from Mestre, joins the city to the mainland; the headlights shone out across the lagoon on the right of the road. Then the car was parked among a hundred others covered with dust-sheets in a garage near the Piazzale Roma. Jean-Noël and Pemrose embarked in a gondola while Guglielmo and the chauffeur unloaded the luggage.

"*Al Palazzo Galbani,*" said Pemrose to the gondolier. "Now, my dear, here you are in Venice," he said as he sat down in the back of the gondola and put his hand on Jean-Noël's knee.

For the first time in the fortnight since they had left Assisi, Pem had a note of excitement in his voice.

They floated across the black water, which smelt vaguely of drains. On each side of the Grand Canal strange buildings rose in the shadows and Jean-Noël could not grasp their details. He could feel beneath him the gentle rolling and the slight pitching of the gondola.

There was no moon, only the stars shone.

The unexpected slowness of the gondola, after the speed and jolting of the car, the odour of decay with which the air was impregnated, the uncertain shapes of the palaces dissolving at what should have been ground-level, all created an effect of extraordinary evil. The city seemed to be decomposing.

The voices of unseen gondoliers answered each other in the night.

"*Oaao . . . sia ti . . . sta lungo . . .*"

The splash of oars could be heard behind walls. And suddenly a slender prow, rather darker than the night and surmounted by a dim lantern, appeared between two houses and shaved the side of the travellers' gondola. One could not help thinking of passengers to hell. What souls was it carrying, what dead was it bearing over the waters behind that fabulous prow?

This impression of evil, of a dead city, of an infernal voyage, was accompanied by no feeling of anguish. It might well be that the light

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of day would never reappear, that they were in process of diving down this mephitic canal till they sank beneath the earth's crust, or perhaps the whole accustomed universe was abolished and this city, with its liquid earth, was drifting through the infinite. And one could live and think in the permanent night, with no other landmarks but the dim lanterns in the bows of the gondolas.

"My God, how I love this city," cried Basil Pemrose. "I feel at peace here from the first moment I arrive. A peace—how can I express it?—a peace that is superior even to happiness."

He was silent a moment, then added: "I think when I die I'd like to be buried here."

They passed under a high arched bridge with a covered gallery. At the foot of the bridge were the lighted windows of cafés and the murmur of human beings; but even these did not seem completely real.

"The Rialto," Pemrose murmured.

And he continued pointing out with unfailing certainty this and that façade among the shadowy houses that elbowed each other along both sides of the dark water.

"Byron lived here, Wagner composed *Tristan* there. But you'll see it all tomorrow. You'll be shown all that. But you need a hundred, a thousand days to get to know Venice."

Almost at the end of the Grand Canal, between the Palazzo Volkoff and the Palazzo Dario, on the Salute bank, the Palazzo Galbani raised its colonnades and its three storeys of windows. The gondola entered a sort of high vaulted chamber and came alongside a marble staircase against whose lowest step the water was gently lapping. The gondolier offered his arm to the travellers to assist them to disembark.

There was another gondola floating beneath the vault, its lanterns out. Two footmen in blue livery opened a wrought-iron gate.

Pem and Jean-Noël entered a sort of covered courtyard, lit in the corners by huge lanterns. It contained flights of marble, galleries, outside staircases, carved columns, flowers and statues rising to the top of the house. Then they entered a huge, square hall, its walls and ceilings entirely covered with frescoes, into whose architectural *trompe-l'oeil* fitted the stucco columns framing the doorways.

"This is the Hall of Tiepolo, which I told you about," Pem said.

The treasures collected in this house were priceless. Here were the furnishings of a Pope; in the card-room Longhis were let in to the panelling. The passages were a museum in themselves.

"Ben owns one of the three or four most beautiful palaces in Venice," Pemrose said.

Prince Galbani, Maxime de Bayos and Christian Leluc were awaiting their friends in the rooms on the first floor, as sumptuous and luxurious as those of the ground floor.

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They embraced and were made welcome.

"Well, Jean-Noël, did you enjoy your journey? Did you succumb to Italy?"

"Oh, it was wonderful, marvellous!" cried Jean-Noël. "I'm bursting with it all."

"Yes, it's been a splendid journey," Pemrose said, his eyes lowered, gazing vaguely at the ground.

Ben and Baba were staring discreetly but continually at the new arrivals' faces.

"We didn't know what time you'd get here. We've got a cold supper for you," said the Prince.

They all came and sat with the travellers while they ate under the coffered ceiling.

"Here are the Three Bees together again," said Bayos jovially.

"Yes, here we are again," said Basil, forcing himself to reciprocate his friend's lightheartedness.

Then Benvenuto Galbani gave them the important news. A piece of the Tiepolo fresco had deteriorated during the winter, the plaster was flaking off the wall, and it would have to be restored. But, graver still, the architects appointed by the city to inspect the buildings had reported that the piles supporting the palace were either sinking or rotting.

"But the Palazzo Dario next door has been completely crooked for two centuries or more and seems none the worse for it," said Pem.

"Yes, but the Palazzo Dario is leaning against this one," Benvenuto replied. "And if my palazzo gives way too, there's a danger of their both collapsing and bringing down Volkoff with them, since it's leaning up against the other side. However, it's not an immediate problem, we've got ten or twenty years of safety."

"What's so reassuring to the spirit about Venice," said Maxime de Bayos, "is that the city was founded, conceived indeed, by rich Italians fleeing before the barbarian invasions, who took refuge among the lagoons to save their skins. It was because Attila was tearing down the Roman temples and palaces on the mainland that the terrified refugees built in the water what was eventually to become this miraculous city, the richest, the most civilized and perhaps the most beautiful in the world."

"Where did my grandfather live?" asked Jean-Noël.

"Oh, in various places, on the Zattere to begin with, I think," Prince Galbani replied. "Then in the Casa di Desdemona, just opposite us."

And Pem, who knew everything, recited in a low voice:

*"J'ai vécu à Venise,
J'ai vécu cet automne
Dans l'étroite maison grise
Qu'on dit celle de Desdémone."*

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"I knew him fairly well," went on Benvenuto. "He was a thin, extremely elegant man, with a dark eye-glass and long moustaches. He was a great favourite with the ladies."

They went early to bed and Pem said he would rise late in the morning. It was agreed that Christian Leluc should show Jean-Noël in the morning what tourists should see their first day, the Piazza and St Mark's, the Doges' Palace.

"It's like going to see the Vendôme column," said Maxime de Bayos, "so that its existence shall embarrass you no longer. Christian's an old Venetian now; he'll be a perfect guide."

The counterfeit adolescent smiled, revealing his short teeth, shaped like the teeth of a saw.

"There's something the matter with Basil; he doesn't look happy," Ben murmured to Baba as they separated for the night.

Next morning, having spent the night in a room that seemed to him like that of a Doge's wife, and having had an English breakfast served by Gugliemo, Jean-Noël, freshly shaved and wearing a light suit, went out with Christian. At last he was going to discover, learn, *recognize* Venice. As with every place that has been too celebrated, too much written about, painted and photographed, he was prepared to be disappointed. He was taking his private precautions.

And Venice revealed herself to him in the morning sunshine more beautiful, more sumptuous, more diverse, more astounding than all the books, all the poems, all the pictures, exhausting every epithet, poised exactly between splendour and vulgarity, oriental, fabulous, floating on her lagoon, a city rising from a looking-glass, her doors giving on to dead water, her shallow steps prolonged beneath the sea by their reflections, paler, fresher, more varied in tone and colouring than one expected, because free of the yellow varnish that covered her portraits in museums. So she revealed herself, with her hanging gardens, her mossy walls, and the sly, sticky seaweed on which the foot slipped; crowded, slow-moving Venice, where for centuries the inhabitants had taken their pace from the slow metronome of her gondolas. Miraculous Venice!

"Let's go on foot," Christian had said.

They crossed the bridge of the Academia. Christian, his dark fringe on a level with his eyebrows and his thin neck covered with a sky-blue scarf instead of a tie, walked quickly. His shoulder-blades moved visibly beneath his light coat.

For some minutes they passed through narrow streets. Jean-Noël continually wanted to stop and look about him, because everything he saw—a little balcony, the door of a shop, a barge laden with fruit and vegetables, brilliant with all the colours of fireworks—was so surprising and deserved attention.

Leluc, with no apparent enthusiasm, called out names as they went on their way.

"This is San Mauricio . . . This is San Moseo!"

Jean-Noël could have learned as much from the street-signs; he would have preferred to be alone and use his time to better advantage.

"They're a funny lot," said Christian Leluc; "so as to have more saints than anyone else, they've sanctified all the prophets in the Bible, Moses, Job, Zechariah, and it seems that for their St Mark they had to go all the way to Egypt to dig him up, so as to keep pace with Rome in the matter of relics."

XIII

Through the Three Bees, Jean-Noël, while assimilating Venice, its palaces, its churches, its alleys, while soaking himself in the charm of that city, in which to go for a walk is to lose oneself, and in which one can never manage to return by the way one set out, discovered and mixed with one of the most curious fauna in the world.

He frequently saw the old Salvimonte, who spent her life in an endeavour to place her old bones in the arms of every young man she met. When she saw Jean-Noël she dangled in front of him the charms of her patched-up mask.

He met an old Italian admiral who lived in the Danieli—that most perfect of honeymoon hotels—and who, whenever he saw a young couple arriving on honeymoon under the auspices of Thomas Cook & Son, gave way to fury. When asked why he spent the season there, since the sight of lovers upset him, he cried: "To look at them. They're such bloody fools!"

And Jean-Noël met the widow of an English politician, Lady Coxram, who, a few years before, had set out round the world with her husband. As he had died in Panama, she had continued her progress, suitably dressed in black, and with Lord Coxram's coffin among her baggage.

He went to tea in the Palazzo Romera, where the library contained no less than forty thousand volumes. It belonged to the Contessa Serveri, "the last great Voltairean" Pemrose called her, a woman of some seventy-eight summers, who spoke five languages with perfect fluency, carried the *Almanach de Gotha* in her head, and knew the genealogy of the Cantacuzene emperors as well as the stages in the composition of the Koran. Yet, even at her age, she had bothered to sue her daughter in the courts over a legacy recently inherited.

He also met another white-haired old lady, who again spoke five languages, but with a delicious, indeed a legendary absurdity. She had been the most beautiful woman in Venice, could no longer recollect the number of her lovers, and had once, at the beginning of her career, been for a while Jean de La Monnerie's mistress, before setting a crown on it by becoming the Kaiser's. She was now dying in a gigantic palace in patient loneliness among her memories.

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He met Constance Waybach, the American novelist, who stood nearly six foot seven. She was a sort of female ogress with short grey hair, was drunk on whisky from ten o'clock in the morning, under the influence of drugs throughout the year, and overawed her circle with her aggressive voice, her sombre eyes and the reputation of her two extremely bad books.

This monstrous woman had also a taste for monsters; at the moment she was seen everywhere with a dwarf. He had the torso of a giant, the face of a bulldog, showed an animal fur at the opening of his sports-shirt, lived on a basis of mutual understanding with dogs and children, and had to perform a sort of gymnastic exercise to sit in a chair. "The only man who has ever satisfied me," said Constance Waybach. "He's built like a bull."

And he met Davilar, the Portuguese millionaire armaments manufacturer, who travelled about the world in a luxurious yacht, taking with him his mad daughter, whom he kept shut up in a cabin upholstered in rose silk.

And he met a rich deaf old man who, whenever he spoke on the telephone, said after each phrase: "Wait a minute, my secretary will listen."

And he saw a great German writer, who had come to Venice for a rest and suffered so badly from St Vitus's dance that his tongue shot in and out spasmodically as he walked, as if he were catching flies.

And he met abstract painters who persuaded naïve persons to support them; and a classical painter whose vision was so deformed that he painted people twice as large as life.

He saw a pretender to a European throne, a man of sixty, to whom one gave royal honours, but who had but one hobby, one passion: playing the drum. When attracted by a visitor, he would take him to the bottom of the garden, and there, strapped into his buff apron, his drumsticks in his hands, the Prince would enquire: "Would you like me to beat you?"

He saw American actors, haloed with the glory of the glossy magazines; he saw married couples consisting of an old man and a child, or an old woman and a boy; he saw a lot of trios living happily together; he saw bald twins of seventy, who were indistinguishable from each other, never left each other for a moment, and had but one mistress between them. He saw old perverts in reduced circumstances, precursors of the period when Oscar Wilde was sent to prison, who trotted about the city, whispering, going grey, angular and willowy, like tired rats sowing discord beneath their feet.

He knew—and he met this man everywhere, at the Bees', at the Salvimonte's, at Constance Waybach's, at ruling princes' and at film-stars— a Hungarian of good family, who resembled Louis XVIII, was so large and fat that he could only get through doors sideways, made

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eyes at boys and little girls, carried in his fat hands a magic wand and was reputed to be the greatest astrologer in the world. He was received everywhere, was feasted and flattered, for all these people hoped to discover from him whether happiness and long life were in store for them.

And Jean-Noël, as people in museums always tend to stop in front of busts and portraits, constructed for himself a living gallery from all the idle, all the maniacs, all the odd, the sick, the outlandish, the over-rich, the false artists, the perverted, the crazy and the monomaniacs who walked at large upon the earth, surrounded with every comfort and consideration. It was a sort of private collection of the decadent, a collection it amused him to contemplate in idle hours and which, when all was said and done, was but an addition to that begun outside the Schoudler house in the days when the beggars had queued for alms.

From this dead water he dredged netfuls of rotten fish. And in the end, by over indulgence in the game, he began to become like the people who surrounded him, in the sense that he ended by believing, as they did, that nothing else existed in the world.

So much was this the case that when, in this society, a man was mentioned who had a wife and two children, who did not get drunk, did not take drugs, did not have himself flagellated in brothels, who worked eight hours a day, went to bed at eleven, occasionally visited the theatre, lived on his monthly salary and, what was more, appeared satisfied with his lot, everyone looked at each other, shook their heads and said: "How can such people be?"

And then, since Jean-Noël was twenty-two, and his break with Inès and the disgust for women it had aroused in him had begun to fade into the past, and since his journey with Pem had provided no compensation, he felt the need to cast his eyes on someone who was at least of flesh and blood; but, in the nature of things, he could do so only in the circle in which he moved, and his eyes came to rest on Pamela Rocapolli who, moreover, had done all she could to attract him.

XIV

Pamela Rocapolli, *née* Sillevs, heiress to half the department stores in Illinois, was an American of about thirty, who showed her gums and was far from beautiful. Indeed, it could be said that she was frankly ugly, but she had almost animal sensuality, a way of stretching her long monkey-like limbs, or arching her curved back, of wearing her skirts tight across her round buttocks, of opening her thick red lips as if to bite, indeed, an air of provocation, of awaiting the male, to which men were not insensible.

"Do you want him?" her husband, Gigi Rocapolli, asked her when

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she mentioned Jean-Noël to him. "Well, that's easy, darling. No, no, he's not entirely homosexual, indeed I doubt whether he is at all. I'll deliver the boy to you whenever you like, even though I rather want him myself. But you know I'm not jealous."

And he organized things with considerable *savoir-faire*. He gave a luxurious dinner-party (why skimp things? Pamela found life extraordinarily cheap in Europe) in the drawing-room of the suite they occupied in the Danieli.

There were tall bunches of red roses and gladioli, reflected and multiplied in the dull mirrors, there were crimson damask on the walls, shadows losing themselves in the gold coffering of the ceiling, candles in crystal candelabra on the four little tables, and, after a dozen gin cocktails, there were bowlfuls of grey, large-grained caviare surrounded with crushed ice, then lobsters *flambés*, strong sauces, hot with Cayenne pepper, French wines, champagne of the best year, whose corks were removed silently by the head waiter.

Pemrose, sitting between the Duchesse de Salvimonte and Constance Waybach at the little table over which Gigi presided, was slightly drunk, a thing that had not happened to him for years. The ogress and the old Duchesse both talked at the same time.

But in any case everyone was talking at once, laughing, shouting, calling to each other.

"It's fabulous, quite fabulous," Pem murmured between two sips of wine.

At another table Pamela Rocapolli, her knee against Jean-Noël's, was displaying her animal teeth; and her dress, cut low almost to the waist, showed the solid outline of her breasts. She could speak only English, and did so in a hoarse voice, with sudden high notes, as if something were breaking in her throat. At any moment now, one might have thought, she would be incapable of resisting the urge to strip off her clothes.

Jean-Noël was drunk too. "This woman is beautiful because she's monstrous. She's monstrously beautiful." And he heard himself saying in too loud a voice: "You're beautiful."

"No, I'm ugly," Pamela replied. "I was born ugly and I'll die ugly. But I've been to bed with more men than any beautiful woman has."

And, digging her lacquered claws into Jean-Noël's thigh, she explained to him with a rare technique of modesty precisely how and why she was peculiarly effective in the art of making love. Jean-Noël nodded his head, approving with the experience of a young man who knew a thing or two. His cheeks were burning, and he was drinking continuously to relieve a heat that was not due to thirst.

The waiters poured out liqueurs for these people who had already had their fill, and removed the tables.

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Voices were loud and minds confused. Constance Waybach's dwarf was playing on the carpet and at the same time explaining the theories of Kierkegaard. Lord Pemrose, sitting sideways in an armchair, one knee almost on the ground, a huge glass of yellow chartreuse in his hand, was arguing with him in all seriousness.

The ogress, her eyes on a level with the chandeliers, was describing to Otto Lutweingel the poetry latent in touring circuses. Davilar, the Portuguese armaments manufacturer, had tears in his large spaniel eyes as he talked of his mad daughter, who scratched the faces of his yacht's crew and tore the silk upholstery of her cabin to shreds.

Lydia Salvimonte hated the Rocapolli because she was monopolizing Jean-Noël. She tried to get hold of the young man, but he only said a dozen words to her and went back to Pamela.

"What do you think of her?" the old Duchesse asked the Hungarian astrologer, indicating Pamela.

"A remarkable mixture of the Venus and Pluto types, made to be the dupe of the Mercury type," announced Louis XVIII's double.

"But those gums, my dear Count, have you seen those gums?" asked the old Duchesse. "Monkeys are put in cages for less."

Gigi Rocapolli, elegant, graceful, his body revealing a distinction that in no way affected his soul, the only one among them who was still lucid, gazed round at the crowd, received imprudent confidences and amused himself prodigiously. He was aware of the moment when Pamela, by a manœuvre which he alone noticed, managed to lead Jean-Noël, who was in a state of both exaltation and abject servitude, from the salon; and he exchanged a wink with his wife.

A few minutes later Basil Pemrose came up to him, his eyes blinking, a foolish smile on his face, and murmured a word in his ear.

"But, of course, my dear fellow! Come this way, I'll show you," said Gigi Rocapolli, showing him the way to the bathroom.

Pem was wavering slightly; he opened the door indicated, and then drew back with a start and shut it again. He looked at Rocapolli and realized that Gigi had seen what he had seen.

"I beseech you, don't go in," he cried in terror, his back to the door, his arms extended in a cross, in an attitude at once chivalrous and absurd.

If Rocapolli had wanted to go in, he would have had to do so over Pem's dead body. Pem's only concern was to save Jean-Noël from a blow, spare him brutality and scandal.

"Let the children amuse themselves, pleasure is so rare," said Gigi Rocapolli with complete detachment. "Shall I show you another lavatory?"

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XV

During the next two days Pem declared that he was "upset" by his excesses at the dinner.

"I think it was the chartreuse I ended up with in particular. I never normally drink liqueurs," he said.

He had not said a word to Jean-Noël about the incident in the bathroom. But he could not forget the scene, that "appalling woman," her back against the wash-stand, leaning over backwards and Jean-Noël . . . Jean-Noël who had not even realized that the door had been opened . . . Jean-Noël who was blind to everything . . .

"But how dare I reproach him, after what occurred between us?" Pem thought. "It was bound to happen. One day or another he was bound to go back to women. God, make my suffering less. God, I promise to return within your fold."

And he promised to visit all the churches of Venice at the rate of five a day, a pilgrimage he invented for his own pleasure, since it would give him the opportunity of seeing once again all the paintings he so loved, beginning with the Carpaccios in the Chapel of St George.

But the next morning, when he woke up, he was seized with a sensation of appalling nausea as if he were suffering from seasickness. The palms of his hands had turned yellow, and when he looked at himself in the mirror he saw that the whites of his eyes had gone yellow too. He had a temperature and pain in his joints.

When the doctor was summoned, he put the patient on vegetable soup and prescribed large doses of liver-extract.

"Jaundice, it's really too absurd," said Pem.

"A typical case; it'll take three weeks, my poor dear," said Maxime de Bayos. "It's a ridiculous disease, but not dangerous."

The next day, Pem's face was of some indecisive colour between olive and old wood.

He was very good about allowing himself to be nursed, but asked his friends not to stay in the room.

"No, don't come to see me, please; I'm too ugly, I don't want to be seen looking like this."

Nevertheless they came to his bedside in turn to amuse him. But he barely spoke to them. His temperature had come down, but he seemed to have fallen into profound exhaustion.

Silently, unceasingly, he lived over again the events of the last weeks. His unhappy love for Jean-Noël, the discovery of his own impotence, the Rocapolli dinner-party, all the catastrophes that had impinged on his delicate sensibilities.

"Do you want something to read?" Ben asked him.

"Yes, perhaps."

But he barely opened the novels, the volumes of verse, the

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biographies, even the books on art they brought him, before pushing them aside. He kept beside him only the little book on the Italian mystics he had written himself ten years earlier, a volume of which only three hundred copies had been printed.

His only satisfaction during his illness was poring over the words he had himself written and thinking "That's really not too bad, I'd forgotten it," and making notes in the margins with a view to a new and enlarged edition. But the lines became confused beneath his eyes; and he was compelled to interrupt his reading and relapse into melancholy. He was growing alarmingly thinner.

"We must really find some way of cheering Basil up," said Maxime on the eighth day. "I'm afraid he'll fall into a nervous depression as well as having jaundice."

For a long time they wondered how they could amuse the invalid.

"Suppose we bought him a dog," said Jean-Noël.

"Oh no, no animals," replied the Prince; "they carry germs."

"He once had a Pekinese he was very fond of all the same," Maxime said.

Prince Galbani had an idea.

"We'll all dress up this evening and dine in his room. We'll give him a fancy-dress party all to himself."

"Splendid, splendid!" cried Maxime. "And it'll allow us to paint our faces in all sorts of colours and say to him: 'Since you've disguised yourself as a Chinaman . . .' And we'll make him a mandarin's hat so that he feels he's taking part in the party. Genius, dear Ben, absolute genius!"

The question was, should they give Pem a surprise or should they tell him first?

This difficult problem was discussed at length; eventually they decided to tell Pem straight away. He would thus be able to take part in the preparations for the party and it would give him amusement for longer.

There was a long conference in the sickroom to decide on their various disguises.

Lord Pemrose was smiling.

"Yes, yes, Baba as a maharanee will be wonderful," he said.

And Baba, taking Ben aside, whispered: "You see, he's amused. It was a splendid idea of yours!"

The palace was in a state of effervescence all day, as if a real ball were in question. Maxime de Bayos went out into the town to pillage the make-up shops. Boxes were brought down from the attics, containing all kinds of garments the Three Bees had brought back from their travels: embroidered blouses of Slovakian peasant-women, saris from Nepal, Saharan sarouals, Tyrolean Lederhosen, Jewish marriage-garments.

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Christian Leluc took a strange pleasure in fingering these fripperies, the golden embroideries, the lace.

Jean-Noël was not very far removed from the time when he had played at dressing-up with Marie-Ange. Ben and Baba were terribly busy, in the clutch of a life-long passion for transvestitism, and became so enthusiastic that, in the end, they completely forgot that Basil was ill.

They kept rushing into his room to ask what colour he wanted his mandarin's buttons to be. Then Maxime returned shouting: "We've found a geisha's wig! It'll be ever so much better!" And then Jean-Noël was pushed into the room, dressed in the pleated shirt and striped stockings of a Neapolitan fisherwoman.

"Don't you think he looks nice?"

Some of the costumes revived old, tender memories: "Do you remember the Tormese ball, Basil?"

Then Prince Galbani, who had decided to dress up as a Renaissance courtesan, went and asked Pem to lend him a cameo that was indispensable to the perfection of his dress.

"You do understand, I must have several rings on each finger?"

"Of course, of course, take it. It's in the left-hand drawer," Pem murmured in a weak voice.

"Your complexion's turning whiter," said Ben looking at him. "Oh, yes, indeed it is, much whiter. You'll see, it won't even last for the usual three weeks."

Pem asked for a looking-glass.

"It's quite true," he said, "I thought you were just saying it to please me. I do seem to have turned whiter."

And Ben ran back to tell the others the good news. Then Baba rushed into the room.

"Don't go too white, or you won't look like a geisha!"

At last, at about nine o'clock, dinner was served at the foot of the bed. Pem's head had been raised so that the splendid black wig, ornamented with long pins, could be wedged between two pillows.

Christian Leluc, his fringe low across his forehead, having donned his most splendid gloves, was dressed as a modern night-club singer, in a black velvet dress open to the small of his back. Prince Galbani, having at the last moment given up the idea of dressing as a courtesan, was disguised as "Henry III at home," which was exactly the same dress, but with a cap on his head, a tuft on his lower lip, and more pearls at ears and neck. Jean-Noël, as a female circus-rider, his eyelids covered in mascara, was catching the tulle of his *tutu* among the knicknacks on the tables. Bayos, faithful to his first inspiration, his face covered with ochre and kohl, was draped in a Nepalese sari.

"Music!" he cried as he stage-managed their entrance, encouraging invisible orchestras with a wave of the hand.

Pem showed less enthusiasm than they had expected. Ben was almost

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vexed. Really, after all the trouble they had gone to for his sake, Pem might have made some effort to play his part. Particularly since his face was continually growing less yellow and there was therefore no longer cause for anxiety.

"I'm feeling very tired, that's all," Pem said feebly, refusing his vegetable soup.

Then the other diners sat down to the table. And as they dined together every night and had exhausted all the amusement the day could offer, they suddenly found themselves silent and dull round the candles in spite of their party faces, their jewelled aigrettes, their ribbons, pearls and make-up.

None of them could find anything to say. A sort of gloomy pall lay over the room, while their forks clinked on the precious porcelain.

They looked at Pem. The geisha's wig had fallen across his forehead. His head had fallen backwards, his chin pointing up towards the ceiling, his neck buried deep in the pillow. A fly had settled on his forehead and he was doing nothing to brush it away.

The four diners put down their forks and looked questioningly at each other. It was the fly in particular, the little black fly walking over Pem's forehead, that seemed to them so disquieting.

"Basil, aren't you feeling well?" Maxime asked in a toneless voice.

Pem murmured something incomprehensible, but neither moved his head nor brushed away the fly.

"Perhaps we ought to send for the doctor," said Jean-Noël.

The doctor, summoned by telephone, arrived a few minutes later to find himself in the midst of a carnival.

"We did this to amuse him," explained the Maharanee, somewhat embarrassed.

"Will you leave me alone with the patient?" said the doctor. "And give me a normal light?"

His examination did not take long. The fly had come to rest on Pem's forehead again. And on the patient's legs little red patches had appeared on the skin.

The four of them waited in their fancy dress in a neighbouring room. "Henry III at home" was walking nervously up and down, the singer was stroking her gloves.

"Well?" Henry III asked when the doctor reappeared.

"The simple jaundice has developed complications," he replied.

"But how's that possible?" cried Maxime. "He'd turned less yellow."

"That's one of the symptoms."

"Good God, what can be done about it?"

"I think a specialist should be called in. I know an excellent one in Milan."

"Is there none nearer?" Jean-Noël asked.

"No, Mademoiselle. Oh, I beg your pardon, Monsieur."

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"He must be sent for at once. He must jump into a train, or a car, or an aeroplane if possible," said Ben.

When Professor Varão arrived from Milan the following evening, the household had removed its make-up, and Lord Pemrose was dead.

XVI

"When I think," Maxime groaned, "when I think that I shall never again be able to say: 'Look, Basil, how beautiful that is!' When I think that I shall have to listen to the music we both loved without him! Everything, pictures, books, landscapes, everything will be intolerable to me. I don't know, Ben, I don't know if I shall be able to bear it, if I shall be able to go on living in a world from which Basil is absent. I can't get accustomed to it. I can't even admit it to myself. I feel that he's going to rise from that terrible bed, that he's going to come into the room, that he's going to sit down beside us, among us. Ben, Ben, how we made him suffer, the poor darling, do you remember?"

Prince Galbani was suffering almost as much as Maxime; he understood his sorrow and felt no jealousy. The eyes of the two surviving Bees were red and swollen.

Jean-Noël had also wept.

"I've lost a great friend," he thought, "a man who taught me much and took me on a wonderful journey. Now I must go back to France."

When he told the two Bees what Pem had said the night of their arrival in Venice: "I think when I die I'd like to be buried here," there was another flood of tears.

Basil's little book on the Italian mystics was preserved as a relic, kept open at the very page at which he had abandoned it to die.

Basil had marked with a long bracket a quotation from St Catherine of Genoa, and they all took the book in turn and read the passage aloud:

"As far as I can make out, the souls in purgatory have no other choice but to remain where they are . . . At the moment of separation from the body, the soul goes to the place assigned it, needing no other guide but the nature of sin itself. And if the soul were prevented from obeying this decree, it would find itself in a yet deeper Hell, for it would be outside the Divine Order. That is why," the Saint had written, "finding no more appropriate place, no peace in which suffering is less, it hastens of its own accord towards that which awaits it . . . I will go further, I recognize that Paradise has no doors, and who will may enter . . ."

And in the margin, Pem had written in a feeble hand: "Hell is upon earth. Things work out here in the same way. Each one of us, when all is said and done, occupies and cannot help occupying the place in the universe which his own nature deserves, the nature bounded by his de-

sires, his needs, his vices and his hopes. Each one secretes his own poison feeds his own furnace; each one of us prefers the torture his own nature inflicts on him to all happiness and all peace that would entail a renunciation of that nature and of the desires that compose it."

Then the words ran into each other and became almost illegible, the notations of a mind that was becoming confused: "A cross between the fatalism of antiquity and Christian free will . . . Is freedom but the illusory faculty of choosing what we cannot avoid?" The last thing Pem had written was an interrogation mark.

Lord Pemrose's coffin was carried from the church of the Salute, where the funeral Mass had been celebrated, and was placed in the gondola-hearse which was decked with ostrich-feathers, adorned with silver and covered with flowers.

Prince Galbani and Maxime de Bayos received the condolences together with the Duchesse de Salvimonte who, because she was a second cousin of the Prince, regarded herself, all things considered, as a member of "the family." The British Consul was also included.

Necessarily designated for the more tiresome honours, Gigi Rocapolli, Prince Dolabella, Baron Tormese and Otto Lutweingel, wearing tailcoats, took the cords of the pall at the four corners of the aquatic hearse. And the four gondolier-undertakers, their top hats bound with silver crêpe, began leaning on their heavy oars and following behind the gondola of the principal priest.

Then came another gondola bearing the crowns and wreaths.

Then came the Prince's gondola, in which Maxime de Bayos looked as if he were dying. The Salvimonte had seized the opportunity of taking Jean-Noël with her in her gondola.

The convoy entered the Grand Canal, taking Venice's major thoroughfare, by which all the city's traffic must move and pass by boat: weddings, merchandise, ambulances and house-removals.

It was certainly the finest funeral Venice had the opportunity of seeing that year. There were at least a hundred gondolas, each with its little black turret, rowed by gondoliers dressed in the most famous liveries.

All the international set, the highnesses, the consuls, the millionaires, the actors, the astrologers, the amateurs of art, the maniacs, the perverts, the drug-addicts, the swindlers, all the Constance Waybachs, the Pamela Rocapollis, the Davilars and the Christians, all these spoiled fruits of a civilization in decay, all these blood-relations in life's pleasures, all these representatives of freedom without responsibility, composed the last retinue of one of the best among them, of one of their most finished, most sentient and most civilized products, the ninth and last Viscount Pemrose.

The Venetians, at the windows of their marble palaces, supported on

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their rotting piles, the old Contessa Serveri amid her forty thousand books, the old Marchesa Torvomani among the memories of her forty famous lovers, watched the passing of this enchanted funeral. The air was heavy with heat-haze.

And Jean-Noël, sitting next to the Salvimonte, had the feeling that, behind the faces he saw at the windows, there were others present, those others whom Pem had so often evoked for him and taught him to locate.

His grandfather, Jean de La Monnerie, eye-glass in eye, lost in a reverie, was at the windows of Desdemona's house; and, a little in the background, dark and imprecise, was the face of Othello.

The shadow of the Duse was at the third storey of the Palazzo Volkoff, and that of Henri de Régnier, dead the preceding year, at the mezzanine of the Palazzo Dario. On the steps of the Ca'Leoni the Marchesa Casati's negroes, their loins draped in panther-skins, raised the torches of dead parties.

As they passed the Casetta Rossa, Jean-Noël had tears in his eyes at the sight of that wonderful little garden in which the presence of Gabriele d'Annunzio was still close at hand, and where Pem so often went to take tea and watch the floating life of the strange city.

Rilke, Réjane, Wagner dying in his garden, the Duchesse de Berry, the Pope Rezzonico, and Byron with, behind him, at the windows of his seven saloons, the shades in golden caps of the seven Mocenigo Doges, Proust, Barrès, Nietzsche, Ruskin, Dickens, Shelley, Chateaubriand, Goethe—all those who had made and remade this city through the centuries—all the doges of the intellect—and the painters, the megalomaniac Veronese, the nearly centenarian Titian—all were here, watching with lustreless eyes the last of their lineage passing to the cemetery.

"*Sia ti . . . Sta lungo . . .*" cried the gondoliers as they debouched from the little side-canal.

Jean-Noël became aware that running through his head was the beginning of that sonnet of Du Bellay's that dear Pem knew by heart:

*Il fait bon voir Magny, ces coïons magnifiques
Leur superbe Arcenal, leurs vaisseaux, leur abord,
Leur Saint Marc, leurs palais, leur Realte, leur port
Leurs changes, leurs profits, leurs banques, leurs trafiques . . .*

And then the convoy entered the lagoon, whose waters were the colour of eternity.

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CHAPTER FOUR

The Trianons

As soon as Jean-Noël got back from Italy, he had to do his military service.

The previous year he had taken advantage of the postponement normally granted to students. But since he had neglected, on going off on his travels, to renew his application, the postponement had now expired. And when he left the train on his return from Venice, he found the order calling him up with the first contingent to do his legal service.

Jean-Noël knew nothing of the army, beyond the Medical Board he had attended eighteen months before.

It had never occurred to Jean-Noël that a district like the 16th *arrondissement* could produce such a large proportion of workmen, artisans and poor employees. The number of proletarians the bourgeois conceal, for their service, in the dark little streets of their fashionable districts is quite extraordinary. To find it out a census, either obligatory or spontaneous, such as Army Medical Boards or revolutions, is necessary.

Jean-Noël was surprised to find that the young workmen were as embarrassed, as anxious and as pale as the sensitive products of the Parisian bourgeoisie. The blusterers were merely masking their stage-fright. There were a few cads, of course, shouting obscene jests at every woman that passed. But there were also pregnant girls come to accompany husbands or lovers who were still minors. And old men gazed with moist, nostalgic eyes at the young men in whom they recognized their past. Hawkers had halted their barrows under the chestnut trees, and were selling trinkets, ribbons and trumpery toys decorated with pornographic inscriptions.

The whole scene had the peculiar melancholy of a popular holiday that no one was enjoying.

After waiting for over an hour, the whole crowd of them entered the door over which was the inscription "*Egalité—Fraternité*," climbed the wide stone staircase and passed with lowered heads beneath the long lists, graven in marble, of the names of citizens who had died for France.

Twenty years of education in modesty, so carefully inculcated by school and family, was suddenly disavowed on the order from a public

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authority: "Undress!" Jean-Noël could never have believed that three hundred twenty-year-old bodies, suddenly exposed, could manifest so much of ugliness, deformity, blemish, curvature, acne and precocious obesity. The boys turned automatically to the wall to remove their trousers. One of this naked herd destined to defend the nation, Jean-Noël was passed from one black-gaitered gendarme, who alternately covered each of his eyes to test his sight, then to a second who weighed him, then to a third who banged a measuring rod on his head, and then to a fourth who directed him towards a big table. Behind the table sat a bespectacled general, his oak-leaves reposing in front of him, an amorphous colonel and a number of other important-looking men taking notes, though what they were taking notes about one could not tell.

A major, the only member of the whole board who seemed to have some lingering glimmer of intelligence, asked Jean-Noël about his scholastic record.

"*Baccalauréat*," replied Jean-Noël.

"Can you read and write?" went on the major, following a printed list of questions.

"Yes."

"Ride a bicycle?"

"Yes."

"A horse?"

"Yes."

"Drive a motor-car?"

"Yes."

And, to conclude, he palpated Jean-Noël's testicles and told him to cough.

When, on his return from Venice, and still suffering from the shock of Pem's death, Jean-Noël had to face the prospect of life in garrison with bug-ridden barrack-rooms, six o'clock reveille, promiscuity and arms-drill, he was seized with panic.

Marie-Ange had gone to live in a little furnished flat in the Muette quarter, "lent by Lachaume, till I can find something else," she explained somewhat embarrassed, for the Minister had taken it to lodge his young mistress. But Marie-Ange had arranged that there should be a room for her brother.

She was secretive about her relationship with Simon; though she had promised herself to explain everything to Jean-Noël as soon as he arrived and try to make him understand that she was not to blame.

But he asked for no confidences nor showed any signs of disapproval. He did not even enquire why she had left Germain, on which Simon had insisted. Jean-Noël had been living for several months on the three Bees. He was not concerned by the fact that his sister should be maintained, in part, by a fifty-year-old Minister.

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He gazed round the room, so affectionately prepared for him by Marie-Ange, with contemptuous indulgence, cast his eye over the knick-nacks she had placed about it, which recalled their childhood and their parents.

"It's charming. So deliciously *petit bourgeois*. Really, very amusing," he said.

He rearranged the flowers in the vases.

"Very few women know how to arrange flowers," he murmured.

Then, obsessed by his leaving for the army, he said: "Lachaume clearly ought to be able to do something for me. Why don't you get him to ask the Minister for War to have me posted to some office in Paris?"

"But he is the Minister for War."

"What? Since when?" cried Jean-Noël.

"Since five weeks ago, after the Government reshuffle. He wanted the portfolio, and when Simon wants something, you know..." she said with admiration which was intended to increase her lover's importance in her brother's eyes.

"At Venice we were living completely out of the world," said Jean-Noël. "But that's splendid! It couldn't be better. You're..."

He was going to say "his mistress"; instead of which: "... you're on the best possible terms with the Minister for War at precisely the moment your brother has most need of him. What a perfect little sister you are! When will you be seeing his excellent Excellency?"

"I was going to dine with him tonight. But since you've come back..."

"No, no, darling, there's not a moment to lose. You go and dine with him."

This "darling," the arm he placed round her shoulders, his unpleasant worldly tone, his utter indifference to her circumstances, his complete preoccupation with his own, his haste to turn the situation to his advantage, everything in Jean-Noël jarred, surprised or wounded Marie-Ange. Could Jean-Noël have changed so much in a few months, or had she conceived an idea of him in his absence that he had never justified?

That very night she spoke to Simon. She was a little embarrassed, a little ashamed of asking this particular kind of favour from a man who was apt to recall the fact that he had fought in the trenches during the war.

"Yes of course. I'll fix that," said Simon without showing the least surprise.

The next day, having made enquiries in his department, Simon informed Marie-Ange that he could do nothing for Jean-Noël before he had spent three weeks on regimental duty.

"Minister though I may be, I can't go against the law. But three

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weeks aren't so terrible, after all! I'll then have him posted to the Boulevard Saint Germain. But what he's to do there I'm damned if I know! I'm in process of reducing redundancy in my department. I shall have to justify your brother's employment. I shall also get into trouble with a colonel or two."

Having told the major at the Medical Board that he could ride a horse, Jean-Noël had been posted to the 4th Hussars at Rambouillet.

Jean-Noël arrived there with the idea that his obligatory three weeks were a prison sentence. Yet, after a few days, he discovered that life in a regiment was not quite so appalling as he had imagined. The vermin in the big whitewashed barrack-room did not single him out for victim. The stink in the room in the morning was no worse than that in a railway carriage or the dressing-room of a sports club, and Jean-Noël was forced to recognize that the odour of his own body contributed to it. He did not catch a chill after foot-drill. His hair cut short, his body buttoned tightly into a drill fatigue-jacket, he rediscovered, as he groomed and saddled the horses, the smell of the Mauglaives stables. On the barrack-square he saw officers who reminded him of Gilon and De Voos, of the horsemen and huntsmen who had peopled his childhood. He grumbled bitterly when they went to the café; he cursed the corporal of horse, the military hierarchy and the absurdity of their training, with the same forthrightness and in the same words as the young peasants from the Beauce and the lads from Chantilly, who made up his troop.

He had thought he would be unable to stand the fatigue of the life. And indeed he fell exhausted on his iron bed at night; but it was only to sleep like a log and wake up the next morning surprised to feel himself fitter than the day before. The muscles of his shoulders and chest began to harden and they were no longer the muscles of an adolescent. The hour of the canteen's opening, the sergeant's anger, the eccentricities of the squadron officers, the correct adjustment of his gaiters, these became his principal preoccupations, the subjects of his conversation and his laughter.

The first day the recruits were given a pass, Jean-Noël went with the others, the Chantilly lads and the Beauce peasants, to the brothel that stood immediately opposite the guard-room to drink sticky cognac and have his thighs fumbled by the girls in pink underclothes. At the risk of earning four days' cells he arranged with the regimental tailor to have his walking-out uniform altered to fit him.

The uneasy, gilded atmosphere of the Palazzo Galbani, the death of Pem, Christian Leluc, Pamela, all these became quickly and strangely blurred in Jean-Noël's consciousness.

Jean-Noël was beginning to learn real comradeship between men in a rough but unequivocal promiscuity; and he felt the beginnings of friendship for some of his companions.

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He had been at Rambouillet for a fortnight when the Colonel sent for him one morning to ask him if he were the son of François Schoudler.

"We were contemporaries," said the Colonel. "We were together during the whole of the first part of the war in the Saint-Gond Marshes, and later on the Yser. What's happened to your father?"

"He's dead, sir."

"Oh, my poor chap," cried the Colonel. "I'm so sorry. I really am sorry to hear that. He was a splendid man, you know, your father was, and a fine officer. I've always remembered him with affection. Stand at ease, my boy, stand at ease."

The Colonel was a thin little man, his hair smoothed close across his bird-like head; he invariably stood behind his desk and had a curious trick of rubbing his chest slowly up and down with the palms of his hands, as if he wished to make his uniform fit more closely.

He turned over some papers on the desk.

"Oh, yes, I see, it's on your documents: father deceased. I hadn't seen it," he said. "And your mother too. Wasn't she the daughter of General de La Monnerie?"

"His niece, sir."

"Of course, of course. I'm there now. Well, and what about yourself?" the Colonel asked with a certain sympathy for the young man. "You don't intend doing your time as a trooper, I suppose? It would be absurd. We'll put you in the troop for promotion to corporal, and then assign you to the preparatory course for potential officers of the Reserve. You'll go to Saumur and come out a second-lieutenant. You'll have to do a bit of work, but it'll be much pleasanter for you. Besides, it's your duty. What do you say to it?"

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir," Jean-Noël replied.

"Don't come and bother me with trifles, that I won't have," said the Colonel, still smoothing his tunic. "But if you really need me, come and see me. In any case I shall keep an eye on you. I want you to be worthy of your father."

That evening, in the Restaurant de la Biche, where the gilded youth of the garrison feasted modestly off paper table-cloths, Jean-Noël considered for some time whether he should telephone his sister and get her to cancel her application to Lachaume. But then a certain cowardice, or more exactly the weakness and indolence of his character, won the day.

"Let things take their course," Jean-Noël thought. "We shall see. Lachaume will think I don't know what I really want, and should I need his help on another occasion . . . In any case he may have forgotten, and then everything will be for the best."

A few days later the Colonel sent for him again. The little man was standing behind his desk exactly as before, his legs straddled and his

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open palms massaging his narrow chest. But he looked at Jean-Noël with a certain ironical mistrust.

"Well, Schoudler," he said, "it seems that your services are already essential to the Ministry for War. I have received a secret and confidential order to send you to the Boulevard Saint Germain forthwith. You are posted as driver to the Minister. Have you any friends in the Ministry?"

"The Minister, sir; at least, my family knows him."

"And is this the result of a personal application or one made by your family?"

"By my family," Jean-Noël replied basely.

The Colonel made a wry face.

II

The Minister for War had two drivers at his disposal. As the time of one of them had expired, Simon Lachaume had found no difficulty in having Jean-Noël posted to the job.

Simon saw a personal advantage in this; one of his drivers, at least, would be personally devoted to him and would not go off each morning to make his report to the Deuxième Bureau or a representative of the Sûreté as to how the Minister spent his leisure hours.

He therefore intended using Jean-Noël particularly for night duty, Sunday drives into the country and his more confidential journeys. Indeed for several months Jean-Noël was as much his sister's chauffeur as he was the Minister's.

The first time Simon wanted to kiss Marie-Ange in the back of the car, she shrank away from him and with a lift of her chin indicated the back of Jean-Noël's head.

"But look here," Simon whispered, "he knows all about it; he knows why I've taken him into my service."

Marie-Ange resigned herself to it, thinking that modesty might do her brother harm.

And Jean-Noël drove Marie-Ange to Lachaume's house, and Lachaume to Marie-Ange's, and he drove both Marie-Ange and Lachaume to theatres and restaurants.

By means of the driving-mirror he was able to follow his sister's and the Minister's amorous games and did so with slightly perverse amusement. Simon, as a public man, was extremely busy, his every moment was bespoken, and he wanted to make the most of the rare minutes he could devote to his pleasures.

As for Marie-Ange, Jean-Noël admired her grace of movement; he felt a sort of morbid pleasure at seeing her beautiful lips, her fresh skin, against Simon's bald head and hairy ears, at seeing her beauty and her youth at the mercy of his ugliness. And at such moments it sometimes

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happened that Jean-Noël desired his sister as he might have desired a stranger, but with an added and peculiar spice to the desire because of the fact that she was his sister.

Then Jean-Noël would leave his seat to open the door for the Minister. He had had a uniform made for himself in fine gabardine, an officer's uniform but without badges of rank, which resembled livery.

As soon as he had finished duty, Jean-Noël always put on plain clothes. He lived in Marie-Ange's flat; but on the nights when Lachaume came, he discreetly vanished and went to the theatre, with tickets given him by the Minister.

Simon liked Jean-Noël very much. He expended on him some of the fatherly emotion he felt for Marie-Ange. He called the young man by his Christian name and often sent him on private errands.

"Jean-Noël," he would say, "you're a young man of taste, go and buy me a pair of braces."

Indeed, Simon got on so well with Jean-Noël that he made an ally of him against Marie-Ange, when he went out with Inès Sandoval, for instance, or another of his old mistresses.

When the Minister went to Jeumont for the week-end, Jean-Noël always drove the car. And there Jean-Noël could wear thin clothes and sit about on the lawn in the sun, or play games by the fire to amuse the Minister. He was a member of the family.

But Jean-Noël found the real interest of his days in the driving-mirror, that symbol of his functions, in the miniature screen on which so fantastic a film was projected. For Jean-Noël, as he drove Lachaume to his political duties, saw in it how nations are governed. He discovered the perpetual mixture of competence and frivolity, of passion and indifference, both equally criminal, with which important decisions are taken. He measured the statesman's tragic inability to know the real truth behind the multiple problems he must resolve, and the compulsion he is under to rely on his inspiration or his sympathies. He was astonished by the unfathomable stupidity, the lack of moral standards, of the men in high positions. He saw the incredible self-abasement of even the most famous soldiers before those who had powers of appointment and honours in their gift. He saw crosses and ribbons solicited and commands distributed. He was present at trafficking in tanks and guns and at cold discussions on the amount of cannon-fodder available.

In all these circumstances Simon Lachaume, whom many people looked on as a second-rate man, seemed to Jean-Noël to be of superior quality. And Lachaume was, indeed, *relatively* superior to all those who swarmed about him.

Jean-Noël could accept the fact, all perversity apart, that his sister should be in love with this man.

But Jean-Noël also watched, in the little square mirror above the

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driving-wheel, the passage of the year 1938 with its succession of tragic episodes.

In the back of the car he saw ministers and ambassadors, Presidents of the Assembly, Chiefs of Staff, builders of fortifications, inventors of explosives, specialists in mobilization, all struggling with a destiny that was too important and too difficult for them.

On Lachaume's despairing face he saw France abandon Austria on the night Hitler's troops invaded her. Week after week he heard the Minister for War declare the approach of catastrophe in private, and prove in his public speeches that everything had been done, was being done and would be done to avoid it.

It was Jean-Noël who, the day after Munich, drove Simon Lachaume to Le Bourget when, with his arms full of flowers as if greeting an opera-singer, he went to congratulate the Prime Minister on his return. The Prime Minister, who was proposing to leave the airfield by a back way to avoid the booing of the crowd, was astounded by his reception and the tricolour bouquet. And Jean-Noël drove Lachaume back to Paris in that hallucinating procession as the crowds howled their gratitude at being delivered momentarily from fear at the cost of no matter what denial, no matter what future slavery; and the man who had concluded the pact stood up in his car and saluted the delirious multitude in imitation of the dictator to whom he had yielded.

These were the last official functions in which Jean-Noël took part. A few days later, when fetching Simon and Marie-Ange from a hotel on the banks of the Seine, on a cold night, he got a slight attack of pleurisy which, though soon arrested, allowed him to be given liberal convalescent leave for illness contracted on service.

III

Without money, a trade, a university degree, aptitude or courage, having nothing but his appearance, his good education and a few influential contacts, Jean-Noël drifted about Paris looking for a job. And even then he drifted only to the places with which he was familiar: the salons and the bars.

It was the period when the French cinema was abandoning its apologies for pimps, deserters and criminals, that for ten years past had been the basis of its success, and was turning as war drew nearer to heroic subjects and the exaltation of the military virtues.

Jean-Noël met some individuals who wanted to make a film of this character but had so far failed to obtain a subsidy from the Ministry of War. Without the subsidy they had no interest in making the film.

They quickly succeeded in convincing Jean-Noël that here was his opportunity. The cinema was a young industry and its future lay in the hands of young men. Study and diplomas were of no account, there

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was no need to moulder in universities for years with the prospect of earning, eventually, three thousand francs a month; all that was required were a knowledge of the world and a spirit of enterprise. And from the moment the first film had been made, money could be reckoned in millions. It was the great profession of the twentieth century. Jean-Noël had every necessary quality for success in it. He spoke English, he had travelled, he knew life from observing men and women; moreover, he knew the Minister for War very well indeed.

And Jean-Noël, believing himself to be working at last, let himself be drawn in to that improbable world of double-crossers, bankrupts, swindlers, blackmailers, masters of the short-term loan, misunderstood geniuses, liars, prostitutes, sharks, mugs, cheque-bouncers, pirates, embezzlers, sharpers, the desperate, the obsessed and the paranoiacs, indeed the human humus in which flourished that strange growth, the cinematographic film.

He became one of that plausible, international set of confidence-men that peopled Fouquet's terrace and the bar of the Georges V in Paris, the hall of Claridge's in London and of the Excelsior in Rome, who could live nowhere but in luxury hotels, though uncertain how to pay the bill, whose stomachs could tolerate nothing but caviare, and who sold the imposing car bought on credit a fortnight later.

And Jean-Noël found himself in an office, consisting of two and a half rooms in the Champs Elysées, behind an illuminated advertisement for a brand of corsets, as Managing Director—with full financial responsibility—of a new film company.

He had mortgaged Mauglaives to the hilt and scraped together all the little capital still remaining to his sister and himself to put the money into the company. And then, contemptuous of Marie-Ange's flat, he went to live in the Georges V on the production account.

Every evening he seemed to have asked to dinner half a dozen people he did not know. And since at every meeting a quarter of an hour was wasted singing his praises, he soon began to take himself seriously, to believe that he was a brilliant businessman, that his banker-grandfather's genius was reincarnated in himself, and to imagine that he would quickly restore the family fortunes.

The title of the film was *The Horseman of the Sahara*.

Jean-Noël's principal associate, Sabillon-Vernois, in no way resembled "the foreigners who cluttered up the profession." He was a French bourgeois, possessing dignity and assurance, who had been bankrupt a mere three times and could not attend a meeting for more than half an hour without needing to retire to give himself a shot of morphine.

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IV

To please Jean-Noël and give him his chance, Simon had seen to it that the film was granted the subsidy. It was one of his last acts as Minister for War.

A brief crisis having supervened—the international situation was too grave for Parliament to devote itself to its customary games with its usual gusto—Simon had refused to form part of the new Government, on the pretext that the dignity of his party forbade his accepting a less important portfolio than the one he had just vacated. He was, to some extent, also yielding to the fatigue of having been a minister twelve times in eight years, and for the last three almost consecutively. For the first time he felt the weariness of power.

Simon seized the opportunity of taking a fortnight's holiday and went to the Côte d'Azur with Marie-Ange. It was early spring. They spent there a fortnight that seemed to them the happiest of their lives. They lazed in bed, sat on the beach in the sun with the thought that Parisians were still contending with sleet, took a boat to the islands, dined in luxurious restaurants disguised as fishermen's bars, and roared with laughter at smelling of garlic. Simon tried to teach Marie-Ange to play billiards, chess and backgammon; he combed the bookshops for the books he loved and that she had not read.

Marie-Ange marvelled that a man so active as Simon, with a brain used to dealing with problems of the utmost importance, who lived in a maelstrom of distinguished people, should not only be contented with, but apparently rejoice and take delight in, her presence alone. And she felt discreetly proud.

She was never bored with Simon, indeed very much the contrary. She was bored only when he was not there, when his presence no longer filled the rooms and the minutes and left a void from which she could protect herself only by thinking of him. Like many politicians, Simon had a vitality (and the habit of using it) which, when not employed in public affairs, expended itself on trifles.

Moreover, Simon had one great resource: he knew how to tell a story, particularly his own. He had taken part in all the events of his epoch, and had known the men who had contributed to them, or thought they had, for twenty years past. He had the type of memory that any trifle, an open newspaper, the name of a street or a ship, sufficed to set in motion.

"Little by little my friendships are becoming street-names," he said.

Marie-Ange felt that her life was being in no way impaired by spending this irreplaceable time of her youth with a companion twenty-five years older than herself. She merely hoped that the situation would endure for ever, and wondered modestly how long a man, who had

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known so many women, could remain attached to her. Simon's physical ugliness did not exist for her. She had reached that perfect stage in love when the ugliness and short-comings of the beloved have become more delectable than any perfection.

As for Simon, when he contemplated Marie-Ange, seeing her move naked from bathroom to bedroom, noting the play of sun and shadow on her profile at meals, the light reflected from her lashes or translucent nostrils, hearing her voice or rare laugh, taking her slender arm in his fingers, breathing on the pillow the sleepy perfume of her hair, he often thought: "Should I not make my life with her once and for all? She's much too young for me. But happiness is worth a risk. I ought to have got a divorce and married her. We're having a honeymoon. One mustn't delay too long in making these decisions. She loves me in a way that I shall probably never know again."

He might equally well have thought: "She inspires me to a way of loving that I shall probably never know again, that I shall certainly never know without being ridiculous, absurd and unhappy."

He went out in the morning for the sole pleasure of ordering her flowers. He sang out of tune while he was shaving, and used Marie-Ange's lipstick to draw hearts pierced with arrows and chubby little Cupids on the bathroom looking-glass.

On their return from this short holiday Marie-Ange discovered that she was pregnant.

V

"In everyone's life there is a sort of counterpoint," Simon thought, as he looked out at the gardens of Chaillot beneath his windows. "What happened to me eighteen years ago with the aunt is now happening to me with the niece. Does Marie-Ange know about it? No, surely not. And in between whiles had Noël Schoudler succeeded, as he wished, in pushing his daughter-in-law into my arms, it might have happened, should have happened, with Jacqueline. It would appear that some recurrent fate links me, devotes me, to the women of that family, and that life and fecundity are destined to come between them and me. The only difference is that, with Isabelle, nothing in the world could have made me want the child, whereas this time . . ."

This time, in spite of a reaction fostered by his long life as a bachelor, he could not help contemplating, with an insistent, secret pleasure, the idea of the son he might have.

"But why a son? Why have I made up my mind it will be a son? And does Marie-Ange want it? And when the child's twenty, I shall be an old man, and Marie-Ange will have a lover and the child will treat me with about as much affection as I showed my mother. Really, Simon, it's too absurd."

But the most clear-sighted and pessimistic reasoning could not

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persuade him. A child was the only thing—and the most natural one—that remained for him to achieve in a lifetime of success.

That morning Simon was waiting for Jean-Noël, who had telephoned asking for an urgent interview. Simon had no doubt that the young man was coming to talk to him about his sister's condition. Marie-Ange had doubtless told him of it. He tried to telephone her. She had gone out and he was suddenly anxious. "As long as she doesn't do anything without telling me. It'd be too stupid. But she won't, surely."

When the young man arrived, Simon was struck by his pale and anxious expression. "How he does take things to heart. I'd never have thought he was so sensitive, nor that he loved his sister so much. Poor boy, I suppose he thinks it his duty to come and ask me my intentions and dictate my course of conduct to me. I shall reassure him at once."

He felt rather moved himself, and was aware of a great sympathy for Jean-Noël. He wanted to make things easy for him, to create a friendly, fraternal atmosphere.

"Well, my dear Jean-Noël, what have you come to see me about?" he asked affably, spreading his arms wide and indicating a chair.

"I'm in great trouble," said Jean-Noël.

"You are..." said Lachaume in surprise. "Some personal difficulty?"

Jean-Noël nodded his head affirmatively.

"It's about *The Horseman of the Sahara*. I've been taken in by sharks and swindlers," said Jean-Noël. "It makes you smile? I can assure you it isn't funny at all."

"No, no, that's not it. It was an association of ideas. It would be too long to explain," Simon said.

He had suddenly remembered Urbain de La Monnerie's visit, eighteen years earlier, when he was attached to Rousseau's secretariat at the Ministry of War. It had been when Isabelle was pregnant; he had been expecting remonstrances from the old man, but instead he had asked Simon to intervene to postpone the retirement from the army of his brother, the General. "The counterpoint, the counterpoint," Simon thought.

"Well, my dear Jean-Noël, tell me what's happened? I got you a subsidy of a million for the film, if I remember correctly."

Jean-Noël related, as clearly as he could, the story of his miscalculations. The cost of production of the film had exceeded the original estimates. It had been suddenly decided to alter the scenario, the treatment was not yet finished. But since the co-operation of the army had been arranged for a specific date, they were at this moment filming scenes in Morocco that might never be used. All the money had gone, melted away. Moreover, Sabillon-Vernois had failed not only to produce the capital he had promised, but had used the subsidy to finish another film. Simon, who had been listening till then with ordinary

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good-nature, suddenly concentrated his attention and forgot his other anxieties.

"What do you mean?" he cried. "Have you given another company part of the subsidy to use for a different production? You know what that's called: misappropriation of public funds. You're liable to prosecution. This is very tiresome indeed. You've put yourself in a very awkward position, my boy."

He was thinking above all of himself, of his own position in the matter, of his intervention. If things really turned out badly he would be in danger of having the affair exploited by his political opponents. There would be no lack of people to pry into his private life, to talk of Mademoiselle Schoudler, "the Minister's current Egeria," and to resurrect the memory of the Schoudler crash. He well knew from experience how the press could orchestrate a campaign round some trifling event.

"And since I emerged from the crash—it's true that it was only by abandoning Rousseau and Schoudler to their fate—not only with the honours of war but with an enhanced position, I'm in danger of being seriously embarrassed by this piece of folly, by the ridiculous subsidy given to this boy. It would really be rather too much. If I were superstitious I should believe that old Noël was taking his vengeance from beyond the grave through the agency of his grandson."

"Yes, it's really very tiresome," he repeated. "And you've placed me personally in a very unfortunate position."

"Yes, I know, I can see that. That's why I thought I'd come and tell you about it," said Jean-Noël hypocritically.

"You'd have done better to have thought of it sooner. If I understand the situation aright," Lachaume went on, "the position is that your partners have not honoured their signatures, while part of the government subsidy has been misappropriated to those partners' profit, and the other part has been squandered by the improvidence, if not the swindling, of your collaborators, you alone being responsible. Furthermore, you've got a company of actors and technicians marooned in Morocco. Those are the facts? Well, my dear boy, what do you expect me to do for you?"

He thought for a moment.

"All I can do, my poor boy," he went on, "is to intervene with the financial department of the Ministry of War to prevent their bringing an immediate action against you. I'll manage to protect you from the worst as far as that goes. And then this man—what's his name?—Sabillon-Vernois, must make restitution of that part of the subsidy, otherwise the State, as first creditor, will have as redress the power to seize all his past and present films. As for you, you must try, even at the cost of surrendering a part of the proprietary rights in the film, to find the necessary capital to finish your production. That would be the best thing to do. For once the film is made, even if it's a bad one, the

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Ministry of War will have nothing to say. They're not film-critics, you know, and anyway one's always meeting idiots who put up capital for films."

"Yes," said Jean-Noël, "but I shall need three hundred thousand francs."

"Well, try and find them."

"The trouble is that I must have them within twenty-four hours," said Jean-Noël.

He hesitated, swallowed, and added: "Because there are three hundred thousand francs' worth of cheques issued without funds to meet them. And I'm in danger of being prosecuted."

"Oh, that too?" Simon cried. "Better and better."

"Couldn't you . . ."

"Do what?"

"Well, help me with the three hundred thousand?"

"Really, my dear Jean-Noël, that's going a bit far," Simon replied. "It seems to me I've already done a good deal for you. I'll do everything I can to see that you don't have any trouble with the State. But over the other matter it's no use counting on me."

Jean-Noël, his heart beating wildly, his face drawn with anxiety, raised his head and assumed an assurance he was far from feeling.

"But it would be on the security of part-ownership of the film."

"Really, Jean-Noël, don't trifle with me."

Jean-Noël felt his back grow clammy. He got to his feet, tried to look certain of himself, went to the window and gazed vaguely out across the gardens. Simon watched him with a mixture of pity, contempt and irrepressible tenderness. He could not help liking the boy, because he was young, because he was weak, because he was the last of a family of which he, Simon, had known three generations. "As long as the boy doesn't go and do something stupid, put a bullet in his head, like his father . . . He's got the same nervous sensibility, without the honesty or the intelligence . . ."

Meanwhile Jean-Noël was gathering all his powers of anger and hatred against Simon. "Here's a man," he thought, "who has power, lives expensively and can exercise every sort of influence, who owes his position to my father, who betrayed my grandfather, who sleeps with my sister, and yet refuses to find three hundred thousand francs to save me. So much the worse for him. I shall show no mercy. I have the right to use any weapon I can."

He turned round, trembling yet aggressive, doing his best to maintain an outward calm.

"If I can find absolutely no other way," he said, "a newspaper has offered me three hundred thousand francs for my reminiscences of the time I was your driver."

Simon's first reaction was a desire to smack Jean-Noël's face. He

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restrained himself. "No anger, Simon," he thought. He knew that what Jean-Noël had said was untrue, if for no other reason than because of the size of the sum; stories of that nature were not paid for as dearly as that. But he realized that it could become true, and that the young man was quite capable, even for a lesser sum, of putting his threat into execution.

Simon could procure three hundred thousand francs, even if it were a question of asking a few people who were under great obligations to him to finance Jean-Noël's company. And a moment before this had been precisely what he had had in mind.

But throughout his life Simon had never yielded to threats of this kind. Nor would he yield today, and to a boy. "No anger, no anger," he repeated to himself.

But his expression, the way he held his head and shoulders had altered involuntarily, so that when he took a step towards Jean-Noël, the young man retreated. Jean-Noël was afraid, with an elementary, immediate fear that he had not known since childhood, since he had trembled in the presence of his giant grandfather's anger. And now it was a similar anger, the anger of a strong mature man that Simon showed.

"You thought up this little trick on your own, did you?"

Jean-Noël made no answer.

"You know what it's called, what you're trying to do, don't you?" Simon went on. "Blackmail, and of the most dastardly kind, if there are degrees in the particular form of infamy that consists in using a service done you to turn it against the man to whom you owe it. Monsieur le Baron Schoudler, descendant of Academicians, Marshals and Governors of the Bank of France, you're a cowardly little runt who'd sell his friends, his sister and his country to get himself out of a scrape into which his vanity and his desire to make money by doing nothing has landed him. Now, sit down and listen to me. If you ever try to put your little project into practice, supposing you can find an editor foolish enough to do it, both you and he will find yourselves in prison within twenty-four hours. Because anything that touches the Ministry of War may be considered an official secret concerning the external security of the State, and I shall see to it, my young friend, that you are tried by court-martial. If you really want to do a term in the Santé, you'll do better, believe me, to go there as an insolvent debtor rather than for divulging information concerning the higher organization of the Army. Now, as to your cinema business, you'll go and find this Sabillon and your other partners and tell them they must make restitution of the government subsidy to the purposes for which it was granted, and within a week; failing which, you will be prosecuted for embezzlement and they will be prosecuted for receiving. As for covering your cheques, you'll do well to talk to them about that too, for if

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you're arrested for swindling and your company declared bankrupt, given the malpractices you've been up to, their situation is unlikely to be much better than your own. There you are!"

Jean-Noël was crushed by this speech and by the confident tone in which it was uttered. He felt that if he had said to Simon: "There's nothing left for me to do but throw myself into the Seine," the latter would have unhesitatingly replied: "Yes, it's clearly the best thing you can do."

Simon, feeling that he had checkmated the young man, took the opportunity of ramming his advantage home.

"I could, indeed I should," said Simon, "throw you out with a kick in the backside and telephone the Ministry to look into your affairs and have you arrested at once. The only reason I shall not do so is because of my affection for your sister; and the fact that I wish to spare her is a piece of good luck for you. But now I'm making threats, not you. I give you a week, do you hear, to come back to me with proof that the matter has been dealt with. If not, you can expect the worst."

Jean-Noël's behaviour suddenly became childlike. With a candid, humble, sincere expression, he said: "I'm very sorry, Simon. I didn't know what I was saying just now. I lost my head. I didn't intend to do it. I'm not really such a cad as I've led you to believe. I'll prove it to you."

Simon shrugged his shoulders to show that he put no faith in this.

And when the young man had gone, he sank back in his chair and reflected for a long time. "If I have a son," he thought, "perhaps that's what he'll be like."

VI

From the moment he left Simon's office Jean-Noël knew neither day nor night for a whole week. His mental anguish created a condition that resembled drunkenness, prevented his sleeping, and drove him to unceasing mental and physical activity.

Between his elusive partners and the enormous sum that was falling due, he sometimes felt overwhelmed with despair and towards five o'clock in the morning, with his nerves shattered and his head aching, he would suddenly think: "To hell with it, I'll go to prison. Then it'll be over and I shall be able to rest."

He also thought seriously of killing himself, which would be a still greater and more permanent rest. He kept thinking of his father; and Jean-Noël told himself that he was subject to an hereditary fatality.

Then, an hour later, some new idea would restore his energy, and, as soon as offices opened, he set out once more. He reviewed the company's accounts from end to end and read all the documents over again so as to understand exactly what he was committed to. Meanwhile squadrons of the French Army continued to march about the spurs of

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the Atlas Mountains before the cameras, and Jean-Noël received telegrams telling him that all was going well, but that he must send funds.

He was still living in the Georges V since he had no money to pay the bill that would allow him to leave.

He went to consult solicitors, who advised him either to come to an agreement with his partners or to bring a case against them. He could be sure of winning it—in two or three years' time. He managed to get a few days' grace from his creditors, but it was ridiculously short.

Sabillon-Vernois and Jean-Noël's other associates realized that things were likely to turn out very badly. But since they refused to contemplate any bankruptcy that was not of advantage to themselves, they proposed an arrangement by which Jean-Noël would be the only loser.

It was agreed that the company floated for *The Horseman of the Sahara* should become a subsidiary of Sabillon-Vernois's company, with the same chairman, the same offices and the same bank. Ante-dated documents would mask the irregularity in the use of public funds, and the subsidy would thereby be restored to its original purpose. Jean-Noël would withdraw entirely from the affair, resigning his shares and all his capital, and renouncing all proprietary rights in the film as well as his percentage of the profits.

"Your management has been extremely bad," Sabillon-Vernois declared, between two shots of morphine. "This is all we can do."

There still remained the three hundred thousand francs of cheques without cover, but Sabillon and the others refused to have anything to do with them.

"But since I'm resigning all my assets to you . . ." said Jean-Noël.

"That's quite another matter; don't let's discuss that all over again, do you mind? Otherwise we'll wash out everything that's been agreed."

Jean-Noël felt that he was drowning again.

He went and asked Aunt Isabelle for fifty thousand francs. She was shocked, promised them, changed her mind, said that she had not got them, and finished by giving him twenty thousand.

"And it means that I shall have to give your grandmother's jewels as security; that's what you're forcing me to do, my boy."

He went and saw his cousin Valleroy, to whom he did not dare tell the whole truth, but who nevertheless suspected it. The Duc gave him a long lecture and finished by saying: "Well, I'll see what I can do for you. Telephone me tomorrow."

And the next day Jean-Noël got the answer that the Duc had left for a fortnight in Lorraine.

Jean-Noël went to his grandfather's publisher to collect all the royalties that La Monnerie's works had produced in the last eighteen months. They amounted to fifteen hundred francs.

Jean-Noël sold the gold cigarette-case Pem had given him, and the few trinkets he possessed that had any value.

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This allowed him to pay the hotel bill and take refuge with Marie-Ange.

She was alarmed at Jean-Noël's appearance, the fact that he was so thin and had the look of a hunted animal.

"You don't need to tell Simon that I've come back," said Jean-Noël. "And you don't need to tell anyone else either. If anyone should telephone, I'm not here, you haven't seen me for a long time, and you don't know where I am."

"Simon told me that you were in trouble over your film, and that you'd behaved rather badly to him," Marie-Ange replied. "But he didn't want to tell me about it. I've telephoned you several times. They said you had gone out."

"I had good reasons for cutting off my telephone. Marie-Ange, how much money have you still got in the bank?"

"Barely forty thousand francs I suppose," Marie-Ange said.

Jean-Noël told her the whole story.

"I seem to be having a splendid run of luck!" said Marie-Ange.

Jean-Noël had never seen his sister so anxious and preoccupied; he had never known her so unsympathetic, aggressive almost, with an air of being concerned entirely with herself.

"Simon must have put her against me," he thought.

"Marie-Ange, I need those forty thousand francs."

"But if I give them to you," she said, "you must realize that I shall have nothing left, nothing at all, not a penny."

"All the same, you're not going to let me go to prison, and they'll help me to gain a little time."

"I shall be completely at Simon's mercy."

"He can very well look after you for a time," Jean-Noël replied. "And then you can go back to Marcel Germain of course. Only for a few months, till I've found another job."

"What, be a mannequin with a stomach like that?" she cried opening her arms wide. "Yes, that's the fact. I'm pregnant, if you want to know."

And she collapsed into a chair and wept against its arm.

"What do you mean? How has it happened?" Jean-Noël said.

"Oh, as it always does happen," she replied between sobs, shrugging her shoulders.

"Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

"You weren't here."

"If I'd known, if I had only known," said Jean-Noël.

He began walking up and down the room. If he had known, he would have been able to speak to Simon in quite a different tone; instead of making an absurd attempt at blackmail, he could have brought sentimental pressure to bear that would have been much more skilful and much more effective. He could even have made use of Marie-Ange

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to get round Simon. He had kept away from Marie-Ange during these last weeks for shame of showing himself to her while he was losing all they possessed. Everything had gone as badly as it possibly could.

"Yes, we really are having a run of bad luck. But I suppose Simon will marry you?" he said.

"How should I know? Does he want to marry me? Can he get a divorce? His wife's not in Paris. She's only due back in a few days' time. Do I even know if I want to marry him?"

She ended by agreeing to what he asked, that is to say she let him have thirty thousand francs out of the forty that remained to her.

"Perhaps Jean-Noël's disasters will give me a miscarriage," she thought hopefully. "It seems there are women whom some great trouble . . . Besides, if I have no money left and nothing works out, it'll be another reason for putting an end to it."

And she went into the kitchen to eat a chocolate éclair. Since she had been pregnant she had a constant, insatiable craving for chocolate éclairs and ate them continually throughout the day.

Jean-Noël was returning home from having liquidated his most dangerous debt, thanks to Marie-Ange's thirty thousand francs and Isabelle's twenty thousand. He was crumpling the recovered cheque in his pocket and thinking: "Still another two hundred and fifty thousand to find; but where, how?" Then, suddenly, at the corner of the Rue Cambon and the Rue Saint-Honoré, he met Christian Leluc.

Christian had not altered; he still had the same dark fringe across his forehead, the same adolescent appearance, the same shifty look, the same slim hands. He was wearing a scarf round his chicken's neck.

On seeing him Jean-Noël immediately thought of Prince Galbani and Maxime de Bayos. If they were in Paris there might be some hope there.

"But Ben's dead. What, didn't you know?" Christian said. "It was two months ago. In a very odd way. While he was looking for a book in the Palazzo library, the bracket supporting a shelf on which stood the bronze bust of some Roman Emperor, Tiberius or Commodus, gave way, and the bust caught Ben on the head. Nobody knew precisely whether it was the bust that killed him on the spot, or whether he broke his back falling from the ladder. Besides," Leluc added, "he wasn't at all nice to me latterly. It didn't bring him any luck."

And the counterfeit adolescent, baring his pointed teeth, gave a wicked smile that Jean-Noël found unpleasant.

"And Baba?"

"Baba's gone to recover from his sorrow in Hungary. The Abbey is for sale. He never wants to set foot in it again."

Jean-Noël's hopes were destroyed as soon as he had thought of them.

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"Who's Ben's heir?" he asked suddenly.

He thought: "Perhaps it's he, perhaps it's Christian who's got Ben's fortune. There might be some hope . . ."

Christian looked ugly.

"It's his cousin; you know, the Salvimonte. The old bitch has got the lot," said Christian. "It's crazy. With the estates, the château, the palaces and the works of art, there must have been something like twenty to twenty-two millions. What does the old sow, who's already as rich as hell, want with all that? Ben promised me that he had put me in his will, a third for me, a third for Maxime and the rest for his cousin. But they've never been able to find the will. And I got nothing, except a few gold boxes and a jewel or two I had the sense to snaffle as soon as the bust hit Ben. And even then Baba wanted to make me give them back!"

"Where is she at the moment?" Jean-Noël asked.

"Who?"

"The Duchesse de Salvimonte."

"I think she's in Paris. Someone told me they'd seen her recently. To hell with her!"

They were passing a glove shop, and Jean-Noël quickly said goodbye to Christian Leluc, whose lips were smiling strangely.

"I'm giving a concert in a fortnight's time. My first recital in Paris," said Christian, holding Jean-Noël's hand. "The posters are going up tomorrow. You'll come, won't you?"

"Of course I will," said Jean-Noël.

VII

She was turned towards the window, powdering her face, when he came in. She was wearing a black, rather short dress whose silk gleamed in the light, and a tiny gold chain under her stocking, about her ankle, that had once been slender and was now only thin.

"Jean-Noël, *caro*, how lovely to see you, darling!" she cried with the Russian accent that became more pronounced at moments of social enthusiasm.

She held out her dry, brittle hands laden with two enormous diamonds.

"I arrived only four days ago," she went on, "and I was just saying to myself: 'Shall I see dear Jean-Noël? Where is he? How can I get hold of him? Will he remember me?' And now I have the unexpected pleasure of a visit from him. Sit down and tell me what you've been doing all this time? Tell me, I want to know everything. I've had so many anxieties, worries . . ."

And it was she who told him what she had been doing, exhaustively, for a whole quarter of an hour. She gave her version of Ben's death.

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According to her, it was "that frightful little Leluc, you know," who must have dealt the fatal blow.

"They were alone in the Palazzo when this very improbable accident took place," she said. "All the servants were either running messages or down in the kitchens. Well, don't you think it likely? And then afterwards I had all the bother of the inheritance. Ben left his affairs in an impossible state; rack and ruin, my dear, sheer rack and ruin. But in spite of all the business I've had to deal with, I'm bored, *caro*, so bored. I travel about, I go here and there, and I never find one tiny spark of happiness."

And as she talked she turned towards Jean-Noël that patched-up face, that flesh restretched by the lancet, that mask of tragedy, of the sorrow of growing old, of being no longer desirable. And yet it seemed as if the play were even now lasting too long, for already the forehead and the nostrils were recovering their natural lines and, of the remodelled mask, there remained but the yellow, withered scar that joined it to the ravaged neck and elongated ears.

She gazed at Jean-Noël out of her grey eyes beneath their crumpled lids, so uselessly laden with green; nacreous eye-shadow, with increasingly embarrassing intensity.

She stared at the band of light outlining the young man's face, noted the way his hair curled above his ears and at his neck, watched his hands moving below the narrow cuffs, gazed at the curve of his knee. And when she met his eyes, far from looking away, she seemed to seize on them, suck them in. And her scrawny old bosom heaved.

"You're very handsome, darling," she cried suddenly. "I don't suppose I'm being original; people must often have told you so. But why shouldn't women have the same right to tell men they're beautiful as men have to tell women?"

Jean-Noël was not quite sure what attitude to adopt.

"And you're so charming," he replied politely.

She thanked him with a smile which revealed her teeth; they were loose and yellow from tobacco.

"Oh, darling, it's the Slav charm," she replied with an affectation of irony which displaced the joints of her mask. "I always say: 'The Slav charm is a tyranny which the tyrannized are unable to do without.' My mother was Russian, you know. Yes, I think I've told you. And my father was Italian. But I spent the greater part of my childhood in St Petersburg."

Jean-Noël feared she would tell him her whole life-story, as well as the double family history since the reigns of Vladimir the Great on the one hand, and that of Cosmo de Medici on the other. He felt the needle of anguish sharp in his stomach, and wondered how to approach the object of his visit.

"Well, darling? What about you?" she asked once more. "Tell me everything, I want to know all. Your loves . . ."

Jean-Noël leapt at the chance that he felt might not occur again.

"Dearest Lydia," he said; "you'll allow me to call you that . . ."

He knew she adored young men calling her by her Christian name.

"But of course, darling, of course," she cried, revealing her yellow teeth and taking the opportunity to seize and squeeze his hand.

"Dearest Lydia," he went on, "I've come to ask you to save my life."

"But how? Of course I'll do anything you want. What's the matter? Is it an affair with a woman? An affair with a man? Darling, beware of very young women; they're selfish, atrocious. When I was very young I was appallingly wicked."

She had not let go of his hand.

"Lydia, could you act as my banker for a few days?" he said.

"But, of course . . ." she cried, carried away by the current of her enthusiasm.

Then she grasped what he had said. The light in her old eyes faded suddenly. Jean-Noël felt the dry hand release its grasp and break away from his.

And for the twentieth time in the last few days Jean-Noël told his story, or rather told lies for the twentieth time, but different ones. The old Duchesse listened out of politeness, or rather pretended to listen, chewing the cud of her disappointment. "What on earth was I thinking of? That he had come here for the mere pleasure of seeing me?"

Faced with her absent, inattentive gaze, Jean-Noël felt once again that he was telling his lies to the wrong person. It was to Simon, to Valleroy, that he should have talked of the great profits in prospect, of the momentary difficulties of finance. To the Duchesse de Salvimonte he would have done better to say merely that he had signed cheques without cover. It might have amused her. For a second it occurred to Jean-Noël that it would be easier to kill this old woman, crack her skull against the marble of a console-table, make away with her jewels, tear off the two big diamonds that adorned her emaciated fingers. He watched them glitter as she lit a cigarette.

"Well, darling, how much do you want?" she asked rather impatiently, puffing out smoke.

"Two hundred and fifty thousand."

"Oh dear! Two hundred and fifty thousand? Darling, that's quite a sum of money! You know how I should like to help you. But I really don't think I've got that amount at the moment. You can't imagine how difficult things are with death duties and the upkeep of all these houses on my hands! I'm absolutely poverty-stricken! People laugh when I say that, but it's quite true, *caro*."

Jean-Noël looked so distressed that she was moved, not because he was suffering, but because his distress made him handsomer yet, lent

him a sort of physical weakness that made him still more desirable in her eyes.

"Unless, unless perhaps," she said, pretending to reflect, "I got my banker in Rome to make a transfer here . . ."

She saw the blood come back to the young man's cheeks, his body straighten up, the light return to his eyes.

She wanted once again to enjoy that touching distress of a moment before.

"No," she said, shaking her head. "I don't believe that even my Italian bank . . . I'm terribly sorry."

Jean-Noël turned pale. Beads of sweat shone above his fair eyebrows. He took his head in his hands.

An agreeable current seemed to flow through the Salvimonte's old loins. She would have liked to maintain, to prolong this current. "When all's said and done, my money is me. I can get anything I want with my money." She saw Jean-Noël entirely at her mercy; she could play with this handsome boy, play with his nerves and the pulsations of his blood. And she could imagine other games.

"It's really such a large sum," she said.

"I assure you, Lydia," he replied, his hands clenched, "that if I don't find the money I think I shall kill myself."

"Really, really, darling, one doesn't kill oneself over money. One thinks that at twenty . . . Listen, darling, I shall be putting myself in a very vexatious position, but I don't want to leave you in a state like this. We'll go to my bank together."

He offered her guarantees, a second mortgage on Mauglaives. She swept the proposal away with a wave of her hand—"God, how boring he is with his financial troubles!"—and said: "You'll just sign me a paper, I don't know how one draws that sort of thing up; it'll be just for me, so that I shan't forget, I'm so absent-minded."

Jean-Noël sprang to his feet, took her by the shoulders in sincere gratitude and cried: "Dearest Lydia, you don't know how grateful I am to you!"

"But, darling," the old mask replied flirtatiously, "I'm counting on you to prove it."

And she caressed his hands with her diamonds.

Jean-Noël looked at his watch. It was three o'clock.

"Could we go to your bank now?" he asked humbly.

"Yes, we could," she replied without enthusiasm.

She rose to her feet, went to the dressing-table, and tied three rows of pearls as big as nuts round the neck that looked like a bundle of dead snakes. She put on a tiny varnished black straw hat, whose elastic turned up the white roots of her mahogany-dyed hair at the neck.

"And why am I going to the bank with him?" she wondered. "Why don't I simply give him a cheque and say: 'Now make love to me at

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once.' Why do I want him to understand this bargain on his own? It's this ridiculous shyness that has so cramped me all my life. And yet I don't want to be like those horrible old women who buy boys for themselves. And anyway two hundred and fifty thousand francs is too dear."

"But you know," she said, "I can only lend it you for three days."

"Of course," said Jean-Noël. "In three days I promise you . . ."

Then, when they were in the lift, she said: "Tomorrow there's the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra at the Opéra. Would you like to come with me?"

"I should love to . . ." said Jean-Noël.

They left the Ritz and got into a taxi the commissionaire summoned for them.

Suddenly the Duchesse cried: "Oh, I'd completely forgotten. I've an appointment at four o'clock with an astrologer, a magician you know, whom a friend recommended to me. Apparently he tells one the most extraordinary things. Come with me. We'll learn all about your future, and whether your affairs will sort themselves out."

"But the bank will be closed," said Jean-Noël.

"Yes, but it doesn't matter, darling. You'll come and see me again and then we'll go to the bank together." And she searched in her bag for the address and gave it to the driver.

VIII

The flat in the Rue de Verneuil, in which Simon had not set foot for fifteen years, had not altered. The wallpaper was merely fifteen years older, and the chairs had had fifteen years' more wear. The light shining in through the low windows of the entresol seemed also to have aged.

Yvonne Lachaume, faded and lymphatic as ever, a little fatter, her hair now turning white and her face growing yellow, was approaching fifty. Her wedding-ring was sinking gradually into the flesh of her finger.

"You remember," she said, "we hadn't enough money to buy two wedding-rings. So you just bought mine. It seems to me that of the two of us it is I alone who have been bound."

Her voice had a false ring of indulgent irony; there was reproach apparent in every word she uttered. Her placid, attentive eyes showed no surprise, anger, tenderness or forgiveness; they seemed merely to be saying: "I could complain, I could make demands, I could overwhelm you with reproaches. But see how well I'm behaving. I may be silent, but I don't think the less. And what do you want of me today?"

On the dining-room table was the sewing she had been working at when Simon arrived, the same piece of silk underclothing, it seemed, that she had been hemming fifteen years before, when he had left her.

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"Yes, I've got a little lingerie shop with a woman-friend," she explained. "We make out more or less. It's Madame Marin, don't you remember her? The wife of one of your colleagues at Louis-le-Grand. He was a history-master. He's dead. Oh, I went by the Rue Lhomond the other day. Do you remember our first flat? Well, the house has been pulled down to make way for the Curie Hospital. It was there, really, that I was happiest."

Simon had not been there for more than five minutes, but it had already become more than he could bear. This "do you remember, do you recall?" repeated on every possible occasion was insufferable. This woman seemed to have no other function in the world than to preserve the memories he wished to efface, to remain the static witness of the distant years of difficulty and mediocrity. For fifteen years, she had been chewing over her memories, and she licked her lips over them as if avid for a bad stew.

In fifteen years he had filled a hundred different posts, he had climbed every rung of the social hierarchy, from obscurity to power; he had slept with women who were beautiful or rich or influential; he had spoken to crowds and had represented them in Parliament; he had discussed in the Cabinet, in the Elysée Palace, the fate of forty million Frenchmen, had decided the relations of an empire of a hundred million human beings with the other peoples of the earth.

But in Yvonne's eyes, as she looked him ceaselessly up and down, he read: "I knew you when you were poor, I knew you when you were nobody. I've seen you correcting schoolboys' exercises in red ink, and sweating blood over your first article. Others may have of you the splendid image of a man who has achieved power; but I preserve the image of a thin, ill-clothed, ambitious youth, and I cling to it above all others, because I alone possess it and because it allows me alone to look at you without any compulsion to feel respect."

She went to a little table and picked up an old, hideous, worn blotter in embossed leather that dated from the Rue Lhomond—"your blotter, do you remember?"—bulging with press-cuttings.

"I've followed your career, I know everything you've done," she said. "And kind people have undertaken to tell me of your adventures."

He realized that through all these years she had cut articles about him, speeches he had made and his photographs from the newspapers she read. But far from being touched by this solicitude, he merely viewed it with contempt. He could envisage clearly the rôle Yvonne had played during these last fifteen years, with Madame Marin, with the customers of the lingerie shop, with the shopkeepers of the district—the rôle of abandoned wife, the first love of a great man, flaunting a dignified sorrow, acquiring a melancholy prestige from the name he had made without her; because this easy if ungrateful rôle was the only one she could play. Doubtless she bored the dozen people who

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constituted her limited circle by repeating over and over again: "My husband, Simon Lachaume . . . When my husband was a school-master . . . Does your husband like lentils? Mine does too. I used to cook them for him several times a week. We weren't very rich in those days . . ." And the others would be content to let themselves be bored for the sake of the satisfaction they derived from playing their little parts as the confidants of tragedy.

"Why did I marry her?" he wondered. "Did she even have pretty eyes? No, nothing. She was exactly the same kind of woman at twenty-five as she is today at fifty."

And yet there were men—he knew several—who, while free to indulge in passing love-affairs, had wives they had kept by them throughout their social climb, wives with whom they were happy to look back along the road they had come, and with whom they could be nostalgic over the beginnings they had shared!

Were those men better endowed for happiness?

Who was to blame before destiny, he or Yvonne?

He recognized that he was guilty of an error of choice; that undoubtedly. As for the rest . . .

He was accustomed to say in justification of the breaking off of love-affairs: "When a man leaves a woman it's because she hasn't known how to keep him."

He looked at his wife and thought: "She deserves a shopkeeper's fate. And she's had it."

"How odd," said Yvonne smiling, "you still have the same trick of wiping your glasses with your thumbs. One gets older but at bottom one changes very little."

"And haven't you reorganized your life, your emotional life? Have you had no lovers?"

"Oh, no," she said calmly. "You see, I was made to belong only to one man."

There was no reason to doubt it. She had carried vindictiveness so far as to be irreproachable. She had too evidently delighted in her martyr's rôle, and it made her virtue detestable.

"It's not always been much fun, you know. I had as much temperament as anyone else. You must remember," she added, turning her head away and swallowing with modesty. The movement of her throat was like a goose's.

He felt like smacking her face; but that was not what he had come for. He explained to her in the gentlest, kindest way he could manage his wish for a divorce. There was no reason for the absurd situation to go on. Since their separation was a matter of fact, it might as well become a matter of law. Moreover, as far as he was concerned . . . He saw a little glow of wicked joy in Yvonne's eyes, and realized that things would not be easy.

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Nevertheless he went on with his proposals. The procedure that would be simplest, quickest and least expensive, would be for her to apply for a divorce. He would not defend the application and would lose the case by default. It was a simple procedure that would be arranged by their lawyers; it should be all over in two months.

"Why are you suddenly in such a hurry after fifteen years?" she asked.

"Oh, my dear, I need have no secrets from you!" he said.

And he told her frankly of the reason. He was about to have a child; he wanted a child, to bring up, to bear his name.

"I have no reason to apply for a divorce from you," she said calmly. "Why today any more than last year, or ten years ago?"

"But when I say 'apply' for it, it's only a matter, I repeat, of procedure."

"But, you see, I'm not reproaching you in any way. I understand you very well, you know; I bear you no grudge at all. There's no reason for me to change my status."

"But since I'll take all the blame—"

"But I don't blame you at all."

He suggested giving her money, a sum down and a large pension. For a moment she seemed to hesitate; and then refused it obstinately. She was clinging to something much more precious than pecuniary advantages.

How often since their separation had she not imagined and hoped for this particular scene?

Fifteen years of humiliation borne, fifteen years of moderate "temperament" denied, fifteen years of patience, all deserved a payment that could not be expressed in figures on a cheque.

"She was waiting for me when I came out, as schoolboys say. She was waiting for me when I came out into life. Am I now running into a spell of bad luck?" Simon thought with anguish.

He had just ceased being a Minister, because he had not been offered the portfolio he believed to be his due. And the other day, for a moment, he had been frightened by Jean-Noël's attempt at blackmail. He had overcome it in a minute or two, of course, but it had nevertheless left a disagreeable impression on his mind. And now, here was Yvonne, old, faded, stupid, forgotten, dead to his memory, facing him with stubbornness, determination and the inertia of a corpse! Had he perhaps reached the moment for a settlement of accounts?

He dismissed the thought.

He recovered his assurance; he argued, explained, used all his tact; but no matter what he said, he met patches of obstinacy like hardened scars. Did she want to deprive him of having a child?

"But nothing prevented your having one by me in the old days," she

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said. "Besides, if this woman loves you so much, she can always have it without marrying you. She wouldn't be the first one."

She was set, fixed in the single determination to frustrate him.

"No one has given a thought to me in fifteen years, have they? Has a single one of all the beautiful women who have shared your bed ever asked herself if I existed? Why should I put myself in another woman's place now? It would be too easy. To be twenty, get yourself with child, become Madame Lachaume and reap the benefit of all its advantages! Whereas I had all the bad years at the start—and then, nothing!"

"Do you know," said Simon, looking her straight in the eyes, "I've often noticed that women, after one has left them, justify one's reasons for doing so."

But Yvonne Lachaume was insensitive to remarks of that kind.

"Oh, I know, I know you," she said. "When you want something you don't give up easily! By the way, I've got some papers of yours you left with me. I put them aside for you, in case you should ever need them."

And she went and took a bundle of papers from a drawer and placed them in front of him. He recognized his writing of those days, larger, slower, less assured. There was a mass of crossings-out, amended drafts, quotations from authors he read at that time, notes for poems he had never written.

"Sleep—Even through our lowered lids, our glances are still joined . . . Love and suffering. As the unhappy man confesses his anguish, so have I come to you to confess my love . . . Even should the lightning fall between us, we are as one . . ."

"You wrote this nonsense," Simon thought. "And you wrote it for her! Does one so need to express the latent emotions of the heart that one pours them out on any woman, merely the woman who happens to be there? What does she hope for by putting these papers under my nose? To move me?"

He thought of the little poems he wrote to Marie-Ange when they were at Jeumont, or in the Midi, and he felt like shouting at Yvonne: "Don't remind me that I committed with you the same sentimental idiocies that I commit today! Be charitable enough—and clever enough—to let me think that I'm committing my present follies for the first time!"

She had automatically taken up the pink silk under-garment on the table and continued hemming it.

"You can throw all this into the fire. Or rather, I'll do it myself," he said, putting the bundle of papers in his pocket for greater safety. "And supposing I apply for a divorce myself? There's always some means, you know, always some reason; and if it doesn't exist it can be invented."

He had lost both patience and wisdom.

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"Oh, do it, Simon, do it if you like. No one's stopping you," she said. "But I know how long it will take, if one of us doesn't consent. Besides, I could appeal. Your child will be seven years old by then."

"To think that every day people get run over by lorries and buses," he thought, "and that it hasn't happened to her!"

"So you refuse, you're quite certain?"

She nodded her head, smiling, delighted to see his anger and suffering.

"You want to make an enemy of me?"

"Oh," she said, "for all the friendship you've shown me, I don't think it'll make very much difference."

"But what do you hope for by remaining my wife? What do you want? Tell me," he cried. "Merely to annoy me, harm me, avenge yourself, that's all!"

She had risen to her feet. There was a moment when the vindictive irony she had shown from the beginning disappeared. "I tell myself that one day you'll be old, that you may need me and that you'll come back to me."

He looked at her with equal intensity and frankness.

"Listen to me, Yvonne," he said; "even blind, even with all my limbs amputated, I shouldn't want you."

She lowered her head, thus marking what was doubtless the prelude to fifteen more years of solitude and unhappiness.

"In that case," she answered slowly, "you must realize that I may still have a desire for vengeance."

All the time he had been in her presence Simon's whole strength had been devoted to hating her. It was only when he was in the street again that the thought of Marie-Ange and their future child made him realize the extent of his defeat and of his grief.

IX

On the 5th April 1939 large forces of police were lining the road that runs from Paris to Versailles. The shopkeepers of the suburban built-up areas standing on the pavements and the peasants massed at the cross-roads watched the official cars go by, and amused themselves by identifying the faces of the politicians.

From time to time there were a few cheers but they came too late, when the object of them was already far away.

The procession had lasted over an hour and was far from finished, for it was not only the two Chambers complete that were going to the election of the President of the Republic, but also the higher civil servants, the Diplomatic Corps, and a great proportion of influential Paris society.

The garrison of Versailles was on parade; and a considerable staff

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had been detailed to control the traffic and direct it to the various reserved car-parks; flags were flying on the château gates; idlers crowded round the cockaded cars and made their chauffeurs feel important; press-photographers were dashing to and fro; newsreel cameramen had taken up positions at the top of flights of steps; and squadrons of the Garde Républicaine went by at the trot, their horse-tails flowing, restoring to the ancient royal town, normally as quiet as a museum, something of its forgotten pomp.

Simon Lachaume arrived early at the Hôtel Trianon. The luncheon-tables had been set up everywhere, in the long colonnaded gallery, in the salons and even in the hall. The gardens, the terrace, the ante-rooms, the cloakroom had already been invaded by the Deputies, members of Ministerial Offices, and journalists of both sexes in search of gossip.

"Madame Bonnefoy's table, for twenty people, is that correct, Monsieur le Ministre?" said the Manager, a courteous, self-possessed young man who greeted each client as if he were the only one that day, and directed his supplemented staff by gesture, sign or a movement of the eyelid.

The Manager required great powers of memory and professional tact to know which of his old clients he should recognize and which not. On this official day he saw a number of married couples whom he had seen arrive with other partners for more discreet stays.

The Hôtel Trianon Palace, a huge edifice in the classical style, which had been built of fine stone shortly before the 1914 war, had become in 1919 the centre for the delegations to the Peace Treaty, and since then less of a hotel than a sort of institution in French life.

The Trianon was the first stage, so often supposedly secret, of many honeymoons, while its registers, kept carefully secret, contained evidence of all the adulteries of Parisian society. Many writers, hard-pressed by the tax-collector or their publishers, had sheltered their labours there in so-called retreat, while politicians relaxed there between two weeks of parliamentary business. Illustrious feet had trod the great light quiet corridors. Faces, already reproduced in works of reference, had meditated by the high windows that opened on to the park. And it was here, by a tradition which, because it was renewed only once every seven years, seemed new each time, that, before the Presidential Election, the "Trianon luncheon" was held, this extraordinary banquet of more than a hundred tables at which the most influential women in Paris, the great newspaper editors, and a few powerful personalities among the Republican fauna brought together those of their friends with whom they wished to be seen.

"We shall be at least twenty-four or twenty-five," Simon said.

He was sharing the cost with Marthe and at the last moment had sent out several invitations in her name, nor had he been able to refuse

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Marie-Ange's request that he should ask Jean-Noël, who much wanted to come with an Italian duchess.

"Don't worry, we'll arrange things, Monsieur le Ministre," said the Manager. "Oh yes, Monsieur Wilner, who is working here at the moment—Monsieur Wilner is having luncheon at your table, is he not?—has told me to ask you whether you would go up to his room if you can spare a moment."

"How long has he been here?"

"A fortnight. And it doesn't make things any easier!" said the Manager sighing. "On a day like this he gives me more trouble on his own than a thousand people do. But it doesn't matter, I like him very much."

Simon took the lift and went up to the dramatist's room.

The old minotaur of the theatre received Simon with joy. He was wearing a big check dressing-gown, which hung from his shoulders like a cape.

"Ah, thank you, my dear fellow, it's kind of you to have come," he said. "Because later on, at this delightful luncheon, we shall have no opportunity of talking. And I wanted to ask you . . ."

Simon had not seen Eduoard Wilner for several months. He thought he had altered, but could not put his finger precisely on where the difference lay. There were no apparent signs of weakness in the old man's huge body. The hoarse voice was still the same, and that sort of organ-bellows which seemed to blast the phrases from his throat had grown no weaker. Nevertheless there was an undoubted change. In the eyes perhaps.

"It's absurd," said Wilner, "I asked you to come up because I wanted to put a question to you, a matter of technical information, and now I can't remember what it is. But it'll come back to me."

He passed his huge flaccid hand across his forehead.

"Can I go now, Maître," asked a young female voice that made Simon start.

He turned round. Since the door had hidden her, he had not seen the girl lying stark naked on a sofa as he came in.

She could not be twenty. Her breasts were hardly developed as yet, her beautiful thighs were long and plump and her skin was a perfectly smooth amber colour. Her hair was black, long and curled, and fell about her shoulders; her glance had a peculiar quality at once provocative and falsely submissive. It was her glance that was immodest, even more than her nakedness. And her voice, in its composed ingenuousness, had a similar quality of falseness. "Well, yes, I am naked. What's astonishing about that? Am I not beautiful?" her eyes seemed to say as she gazed at Simon with embarrassing self-possession.

"It's Lucienne, my model," Wilner explained. "Yes, yes, my dear, you can go away now. For I've discovered something, my dear fellow,"

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he went on, talking to Simon, "and that is that we writers require models precisely as painters do. It helps me enormously."

So what people were saying was true, Simon thought. Wilner could no longer write without a naked girl, whom he hired by the hour, reclining before him. And people spoke of his extraordinary love for women, of his need for women, right to the end, even at the age of seventy-eight, to sustain his inspiration.

"And do you know who she is?" went on Wilner, indicating the "model." "She's the daughter, or rather the false daughter of Sylvaine. Yes, she is indeed! The "*jumeaux blancs*," Lulu's two millions, part of all that story which you know even better than I do, and which landed poor Lulu Maublanc, who wasn't much of a chap anyway, in an asylum while Noël Schoudler made off with his fortune. Sylvaine of course has never bothered about her. Nevertheless the child officially bears her name. So she does this, and a good many other things too, to annoy her false mother. Don't you, Lucienne? And what's more, I encourage her. It avenges us a little, don't you think, my dear Simon?"

Simon had turned pale. Lucienne. He gazed at the tall girl. She looked even taller standing than she had lying down. And now, erect on her slender feet, she was dressing with a complete lack of modesty that left none of the details of her body to his imagination. She was watching Simon out of the corner of her eye, her expression still falsely naïve and somehow sly; but somewhere in the depths of her eyes lay the glint of her strange vengeance, of the joy of the degradation to which she submitted herself to punish the parents she had never known, to punish the people who had trafficked in her birth and then abandoned her to a solitary childhood and an adolescence of despair.

"Lucienne! The little Lucienne whom I led by the hand to Isabelle one day when she wanted to adopt her," Simon thought, "and whom I had to go and fetch a week later, because Isabelle had changed her mind." Did she recognize him? Surely not, thank God! But she must remember the appalling scene; it must have closed the portals of tenderness to her for ever.

Simon made a calculation; she could not be more than seventeen.

Lulu, Schoudler, Sylvaine, Isabelle—they and others—all those who, by a sort of implacable fate, had ended by punishing each other for the baseness of their souls, the ignominy of their pleasures and the egotism of their lives! That accursed world had found its expression, its achievement, its symbol, in this adolescent girl who was not even its issue, and who, at the usual age of dreams and shy purity, had already nothing left to besmirch, nothing to destroy, except herself!

"What will my punishment be," Simon wondered, "for having participated in all that, shared in it all? But then, is punishment inevitable? Is Wilner subject to punishment? He has had his moments of suffering,

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like anyone else, but he's nearly eighty and is still writing and still successful. He's as happy as an old man can be. Destiny has not called him to account."

"Should I come back this afternoon, Maître?" Lucienne asked.

Wilner reflected.

"Yes," he said, "come at five o'clock, my child. I think I'll finish off the love scene. It's very important to have a model," he went on, talking to Simon. "Particularly one like this. She's very gifted and assumes any pose one wants. If you like to think of it that way, she represents what my character hopes from his partner and what he suggests in the dialogue in which the propriety of the language masks the real sense only for nuns and virgins."

Lucienne, now dressed, was waiting.

"What do you want?" Wilner asked. "Money? But I gave you some yesterday. You want your fee for this morning's session? Very well, just as you like."

He gave her seventy-five francs. Did she really need it, Simon wondered, or was it merely a further provocation, a desire to parade her utter decadence? Another means of avenging herself on the Dominican convent in which her childhood had been immured?

"Thank you, Maître. Till this afternoon then. Goodbye, Monsieur," she said to Simon.

Simon held out his hand to her, as if by this gesture he wished to rehabilitate her, prove to her that he did not despise her. She took the outstretched hand coldly, looking obliquely into Simon's eyes in a way that seemed to say: "If you want my address, it's at your disposal. I can do this for politicians too, especially if they are my false mother's ex-lovers."

"And then, you know, my dear fellow," said Wilner to Simon, when Lucienne had gone, "I shall confess something to you: having a naked girl lying before me is the only means of calming my erotic fancies and keeping my mind free for work."

He went to his desk, bent his large nostrils towards the few sheets of paper on it, and seemed to be sniffing his own writing.

"I'm writing a torrid play," he went on, "a work parched by the sirocco of passion. And in face of the woman's passion, the man tries to preserve his own integrity. Listen, my dear fellow, listen to this sentence I wrote this morning. 'If you ask me how long I shall love you, I reply seven days, so as not to spend more time on it than God needed to create the Universe.' That's good. You like it, don't you?"

"Very much," Simon replied.

"Why," he was wondering, "does Edouard go on writing?"

And indeed neither need for money, nor need for fame, compelled Wilner to write, to add one more play to the fifty-three which made up that life-work in which he had left a complete picture of the society

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and manners of his time. His most famous comedies were revived regularly in France and abroad. He could have spent his last years without writing a line, and it would not have diminished either his income or the honours accorded him. If Wilner went on writing, though his thought was failing and his style old-fashioned, and the effort required ten times greater than it used to be, it was because of some internal necessity, because literary creation was his true function among mankind, and because the accomplishment of this function remained his only insurance against death.

"But what was it I wanted to ask you?" Wilner went on. "I know that it had something to do with a politician, a Prime Minister, who features in my play. It's too stupid . . ."

He passed his hand across his forehead again in that gesture which had struck Simon.

"I think, my dear fellow," said Wilner, "that I'm losing my memory. It's a bore. And I get tired these days too. I have difficulty in getting my thoughts to function. And I no longer dare use drugs. I often wonder whether drugs which speed up the organism don't avenge themselves in the long run, whether for one hour of brilliant euphoria one does not shorten one's life by a similar amount. And at my age one can no longer gamble with what remains."

He sadly shook his great head which resembled that of some taurine god.

"But we all have moments when we forget things," Simon said. "You'll remember what it was; telephone me. Shall we go down now?"

"Yes, let's go and have luncheon."

Wilner took off his check dressing-gown, threw it over a chair, opened a wardrobe and took from it a tie and a coat.

And in the wardrobe Simon saw an incredible collection of dressing-gowns. They were of brown wool, green and yellow plaids, blue, red and gold velvet, light silks, flowered and faded, Persian designs, brocades, their pockets gaping, their elbows worn, their cords hanging, their braid tarnished, their facings burnt with cigarette-ash; there must have been thirty of them on hangers in a row.

"Do you mean to say you travel with all that lot?" Simon cried.

"Oh yes, always, my dear fellow, always, and have done for many years."

"How very odd."

"No, it's not odd at all, it's perfectly natural," Wilner said. "You must understand, it's like this. You can't take the photographs of all your mistresses everywhere with you. It would be compromising for the old ones and embarrassing for the new. Besides, what is a photograph? A flat, dull, clothed portrait, designed for everybody. Whereas it's when our mistresses are naked, naked in every sense, that they use our dressing-gowns. They put them on to go and lean on the balcony on a

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fine Sunday morning in a little Brittany hotel, or on the banks of the Marne; they use them so as not to put on their corsets, their suspenders, their apparatus of rubber and lace immediately after their pleasure, to prolong the dream a little before going down into the street, returning to their husband's flat and their little lies. They let their hair float loose on their dressing-gowns; they all put on our dressing-gowns at least once to go and pee. They leave in them the shape of their body, the contact of their skin, their secret odour. Oh, they're so much better than photographs! I have here all my love-life with me. In Italian," he went on, "a dressing-gown is called a *vestaglia*. It's so much prettier! The fire, the temple and the sacred gestures! Look at this one";—Wilner caressed one of Bordeaux velvet—"it preserves the memory of eight women for me; this other only five. And this one,"—his hand moved to a silk dressing-gown with black and gold stripes—"was a little English girl who was stupidly killed in a motor-car accident the day after she slept with me. She turned up its sleeves. You see? I've never turned them down again. And here there are still traces of our dear Marthe's lipstick."

A worldly old Bluebeard, Wilner's huge, pale, flaccid hand was gently rummaging in the hanging cupboard, caressing his cloth corpses.

He closed the door.

"Besides," he went on, as he tied his tie, "they're very useful to me because of my characters. They're another sort of card-index. From time to time I take one out and make my model wear it. I make her walk about in it, go to the bathroom, come back, and my memories return to me."

Simon thought he must make Lucienne wear the dressing-gowns Sylvaine had used.

"And there are at least three mistresses of mine in that cupboard! Sylvaine, Marthe, Inès. And they'll all be here at luncheon," Simon thought.

Suddenly Wilner uttered a tragic groan, closed his eyes, and put his hand to his heart, crying: "It's appalling!"

Simon thought he must be feeling suddenly ill, having a heart-attack perhaps.

"What's the matter, Edouard?" he asked anxiously.

"It's appalling," Wilner repeated. "Do you know what I've just remembered, because of these dressing-gowns? Oh, my dear friend, nothing worse could have happened to me. Have you ever seen a play of mine called *L'Intruse*? Well, the play I'm writing with such difficulty at the moment is one I wrote thirty years ago. It's *L'Intruse*. It's the same thing. The same subject and almost the same characters. And the trouble I've been to during these last three months to elaborate the whole thing, thinking it was new! It's appalling! And it's because of that dressing-gown, the black one!"

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He was standing, gigantic and miserable, leaning against the wall, shaking his big head with its short hair.

"What shall I do? What shall I do? But don't tell anyone about it, my dear fellow, I beseech you," he said, taking Simon's hand.

He was silent for a time.

"No, basically it's not quite the same play. I think I shall have to go on with it," he said, giving himself a sort of futile consolation. "But how difficult it's going to be!"

"I was wrong just now when I thought he had been spared; he also has his punishment," thought Lachaume.

And he gazed with compassion at the famous dramatist who had pulverized with his pen the men and women of his time, and was now reduced, an old grindstone condemned to turn indefinitely, to having nothing left to pulverize but his own dust.

X

IN THIS ROOM, ON THE 7TH MAY, 1919
MONSIEUR GEORGES CLEMENCEAU
PRESIDENT OF THE PEACE CONFERENCE
HANDED TO THE GERMAN DELEGATES
THE CONDITIONS
OF THE VERSAILLES PEACE TREATY

This inscription, graven on marble, ornamented the huge dining-room of the hotel, where more than a thousand people were noisily holding forth at what seemed a cross between the opening of an agricultural show and a social reception.

There were twenty years all but a month between 7th May 1919 and 5th April 1939.

"The pot-luck of the rich," said Wilner as he entered the room.

Then, placing his hand on Simon's arm, he said: "Do you hear that murmur, my dear fellow?"

"What murmur?" Simon asked, who could hear only an enormous hubbub.

"The great murmur of the crowd. 'Wilner, Wilner, Wilner . . .' don't you hear it? It's my name, my dear fellow; it's on all these people's lips."

He was not altogether wrong. But if he had been listening for another name, he could equally well have heard: "Lartois, Lartois," or indeed "Lachaume, Lachaume, there's Lachaume." For everyone was mentioning everyone's name; everyone was pointing out the new arrivals, exchanging glances, signs, jostling each other, turning round on their chairs to make remarks to each other, all of which were lost in the general tumult and met with wide, hopeless gestures in response, indicating that the remark had not been heard.

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Most of Marthe Bonnefoy's guests had already arrived. Simon, not being a Minister at the moment, had wished to gather, through the good offices of his old mistress, all his most important connections so as to parade the fact that his prestige and power were still intact. The photographers took many shots of the table at which two ambassadors, two duchesses, several ministers and ex-ministers were sitting. They succeeded in capturing on their plates, as illustrations of this historic day, the open mouth of Mademoiselle Dual of the Comédie-Française as she ate a *rondelle* of lobster, Auguérenc, the famous composer, blowing his nose under the eyes of Inès Sandoval, the painter Anet Brayat with a toothpick stuck in his beard, and Émile Lartois, the Academician, passing the pepper to Edouard Wilner.

Simon felt particularly pleased that the whole of France would see him tomorrow in the papers conversing with the Ambassadors of Great Britain and Italy. It was a little personal diplomatic success that his parliamentary colleagues would have to bear in mind. On a more private level Simon had taken the opportunity, by asking Sylvaine Dual, of making up their quarrel which had now lasted two years. He had made the first gesture, had, as it were, extended his hand to her in public.

At this moment Simon wanted to be on good terms with everyone.

"So it's certain that Lebrun will be re-elected?" his neighbours asked him. "And how many ballots do you think will be needed? You don't suppose there's any likelihood of a surprise at the last moment?"

Simon explained the discussions and negotiations which had been going on for the last ten days, and how the retiring President of the Republic, having at first left Parliament in some uncertainty, had announced that he would stand again, then immediately withdrawn for fear of failing to achieve a sufficient majority, only to go back on his decision at the last moment, on condition that the Presidents of the Chambers and the leaders of the majority parties would come and see him and give him their assurance that no adversary would be put up against him. Laval was prepared to support Bouisson; but the Radicals, for their part, would have supported Queuille's candidature. The Senate had brought pressure to bear on the Chamber, and finally Simon, like so many others, was going to vote for a candidate who was not his and who was not even very certain that he wished to be a candidate; and all this because in face of the imminent danger of war everyone was prepared to obey the slogan: "No adventures. France must have a figurehead whom everyone respects, an energetic man who has given proof of his capacity and who has successfully got through his seven-year mandate without scandal."

"You also believe war's inevitable, do you?" asked the Duchesse de Giverny. "Do you think they'll use gas?"

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And indeed, to all these assembled people, who were in fact France's governing class, war was a near-certainty. But this, none the less, did not prevent their swallowing, under the commemorative tablet to the Treaty of Versailles, delicious lobsters, *foie gras*, succulent poultry and champagne, while parading their dresses, their jewels and their decorations, as they made witty remarks to each other and asked each other how they were. If the imminence of the catastrophe was present to their minds, was expressed clearly in their newspapers, rang in their ears twenty times a day, it had not, so it appeared, reached their consciousness or affected their bodies. And when their fears became too lively they allayed them with the hope, which was always a possibility, of another Munich; or, indeed, they used them as a pretext for hurrying off, with a heightened longing for pleasure, to all the parties of that spring, while they drugged themselves with presentiments of future nostalgia: "Let's make the most of it; one feels one may never see all this again."

Was it real heedlessness or deliberate blindness?

As they were talking of the new Generalissimo of the French Army—another sober personage, who had given proof of his abilities; no disasters, no adventures in his record—Wilner said: "I met him once. He seemed to me a man who may know how to use powder, but most certainly did not invent it."

Everyone laughed.

Wilner was sitting opposite Sylvaine.

"You know, I saw your daughter this morning," he said to her. "She's working for me. She's gifted. If you want to see her, she's coming back later."

But he was punished for this piece of malice, because it made him think of his play again. "Should I stop? Should I go on?" A sort of sad disquiet seized on him. Seeking distraction, he turned to his left-hand neighbour, the tall, blonde fragile and eternally ingenuous Madame Boitel, and said: "What do you do these days, you who have made me suffer for so many years?"

But at the same time he was searching under the table for his pulse and was panic-stricken at not being able to find it. "My dear, my dear, my blood's stopped flowing!" he said in a hoarse, weak voice, extending his wrist to Madame Boitel. "Can you feel anything?"

Madame Boitel placed her light, beautiful, pale fingers on his old arteries, and reassured him. He had put his fingers in the wrong place, that was all. His pulse was beating in a perfectly normal way.

Still holding Wilner's wrist, Marie-Thérèse Boitel looked across the table to Jean-Noël and wondered why the fair boy with the chiselled lips, who might so well have delighted her forties, was talking so obstinately to no one but the old woman with the patched-up mask.

And Inès Sandoval was looking at Jean-Noël too, and saying to

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herself: "Why did he leave me so suddenly, without any explanation? Did he ever really love me?"

Auguérenc bent down to Inès's ear and said in his accustomed tone, which contained both honey and gall: "It all makes a pretty family picture, doesn't it? A pity our friend Brayat doesn't paint this type of composition. It'd make a splendid piece for a museum, particularly if he included indications of the sexual relationships of those present. The combinations are infinite. We ought all to be holding fans over our genitals. But what's the matter with the little Schoudler girl? She's not saying a word. Is Simon making her unhappy already? Or is it your presence?"

Marie-Ange was waiting for the *pâtisseries*, hoping that there would be chocolate éclairs. She was not quite happy that several of Simon's mistresses should be at the same table and that her youth should have relegated her to its bottom. "Of course, if I were married to Simon, it would all be different. I should not feel so humiliated, particularly today in my condition. But has he seen his wife? Some decision must be taken, I must know." She tried to catch Simon's eye, but noticed that he rarely turned in her direction.

Marthe Bonnefoy, still beautiful, still royal beneath her crown of white hair, was giving advice about parliamentary tactics to two young Deputies.

And Émile Lartois, in his whistling voice, was developing amusing paradoxes about what archaeologists would be writing about Versailles in three thousand years' time, on the hypothesis that it would be destroyed in the war.

"One will be able to read in the *Guide Bleu* of the period," said the Academician: "'The central monument was the great Temple in which the French, a people of primitive mentality, celebrated the worship of the sun, as is evidenced by the numerous emblems that have been discovered. The recent excavations, made by Schmoll and Truker, have revealed a piece of the royal head-dress. This flat head-dress bears indeed the letters R.F., the initials of King Raymond I Fallières, who is also referred to by some authorities as Poincaré. Under the Fallières dynasty, concerning which we have the most information, and which immediately succeeded that of the Capets, the French were organized as a theocracy. They gathered every seven years in one of the halls of the Temple to elect their High Priest...'"

"... And at the sacred feast which preceded the ceremony," interrupted Wilner, "they devoured the entrails of the preceding High Priest."

It was twenty minutes past one. There were signs of movement all over the room. Simon attracted the attention of the Members of Parliament at the table and rose with them to go to the Congress.

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XI

Marie-Ange was wandering about the great gallery of the Hôtel Trianon. She felt desperately lonely. She longed with all her heart to find a friend. But even the people she knew best only uttered such phrases as, "How do you do, my dear . . . How are you, my dear young friend, you're looking ravishing . . ." and seemed strangers to her, distant and inhuman. And she replied, "Very well, thank you . . ." because she could say nothing else. And she relapsed into a melancholy silence that might have been taken equally well for shyness, contempt or mere stupidity. To whom could she confide her troubles?

She would have liked to have seen among the crowd who jostled her in her dumb unhappiness a mannequin from Marcel Germain's, one of the girls with whom for several months she had shared a room, work, nudity, love-affairs and the fear of pregnancy.

Simon came back fairly soon. The Members of Parliament voted in alphabetical order, beginning with the letter drawn by lot before the start of the vote. The letter drawn had been "J." Lachaume had therefore been among the first to climb the steps of the tribune and place his voting paper in the big urn from which would emerge the name of the Head of State.

He had about an hour before the ballot could be completed and recorded.

"Let's go and walk in the gardens a little," he said to Marie-Ange. "Then we can wander slowly back to the Congress Hall!"

The sap was running at its strongest in the trees and they were clothed in their full spring foliage, their most brilliant green.

The great fountains were working, throwing from the centre of their basins jets of sunlit mother-of-pearl towards the sky.

Tritons, dolphins, naiads, sea-horses poured out their watery spray in which all the colours of the rainbow formed and dissolved. Neptune's and Apollo's chariots lay screened behind curtains of water.

The air was full of the great sound of the cascades. Pomonas clasped their harvest to their breast, Hercules leaned on his club, nymphs lurked in their groves, fauns smiled above their pipes, Hermes extended a hand from which two fingers were missing, as they all warmed their exquisite marble limbs under the April sky.

There were many people in the avenues enjoying this old fairy-land that had been planted, built, sculpted and carved two hundred and fifty years before and became more miraculous still as time went on.

"Well, Simon?" Marie-Ange asked.

"I saw my wife," he said. "She refuses, and I have no means of bringing pressure to bear."

From the feeling of faintness that assailed her, the sense of total

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collapse, Marie-Ange could gauge the extent to which her one desire, her one dream and longing, had been to marry Simon.

Had the avenues not been full of people, she would no doubt have leaned against a tree and burst into tears.

She found the strength to go on walking—"a stone . . . another stone . . . the corner of that lawn . . . the base of that statue . . ."—while all about her the wives of the dignitaries of the Republic grew ecstatic over the royal landscape and Simon went on talking.

He told her of his visit to Yvonne, giving vent to the hatred he felt for her. After his interview with her he had gone immediately to a solicitor.

"I can apply for a divorce and I can get one; what's more I am going to do so at once. But it'll take time, several years perhaps. She knows it and she's taking advantage of the fact. She's avenging herself."

He lit a cigarette and juggled his lighter from one hand to the other.

"It's a heavy blow," he said. "Had I been able to get the divorce in two months as I hoped, then, my dear, if you had wanted to keep the child, and had not been afraid of tying yourself for good and all to a man of my age, we could have been married. Nothing could have made me happier than you and the child. But there it is, and I know it's absurd to say this to you now, but it would have been still more absurd to build castles in Spain before we knew whether it was possible."

He looked at her, and she saw in Simon's large eyes behind his glasses an intense emotion, the sorrow of a boy that took thirty years from his face. It was she who took his hand.

"That was what I wanted. You knew that, Simon," she said, holding back her tears.

There was no question now but that she loved Simon deeply, with the first and only love of her life.

"And what am I to do now?" Marie-Ange wondered.

For the last three weeks, six times a day, as she ate her chocolate éclairs, she had tried to envisage every possibility. Marriage, not marriage, and if not marriage . . . But now that the only happy solution was set aside and all hope was gone, there was another barrier in her path.

All the Schoudler, La Monnerie, Huisnes, Mauglaives and Valleroy heredity, that had not been strong enough to prevent her having lovers before marriage, suddenly rose before Marie-Ange with conventional prohibitions; and not to face her with the Christian commandment: "Thou shalt not destroy the fruit of thy womb," but to formulate society's censure: "No natural children."

And yet who remained of all her family to reproach Marie-Ange for having a child outside marriage?

The four La Monnerie brothers had had but one child among them

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all, and the half-brother, Maubland, had been impotent. The progenerative capacities of the Schoudlers had similarly failed; the recent aristocracy of money had shown no greater stamina. The Mauglaives had been extinct for eighty-four years. The name of La Monnerie was no longer borne by anyone. And the Huisnes would disappear for ever with Isabelle.

There remained Isabelle, that was all.

"No," thought Marie-Ange, "I shall never be able to admit it to Aunt Isabelle, who has had an unhappy but irreproachable life."

But Aunt Isabelle was only the pretext, the symbol. Had she not existed, Marie-Ange would have felt the same barriers rising within her.

For Marie-Ange, the last female descendant of a clan whose most sure attribute had been sterility, maternity appeared under the guise merely of an accident of love.

"Besides, how can one bring up a child when one hasn't a penny?" she thought. "I have no other resources but to work or be kept."

And yet, and yet, all that part of her that had not grown hard, all that went to make up a beautiful woman of twenty-five with a healthy, well-developed body, was tempted—despite her judging it to be absurd—to preserve the child she carried.

Since she had been pregnant, Marie-Ange, except for a few passing moments of sickness, had been in better health than ever before. Every morning, as she went to her looking-glass, she expected to see the dark rings about her eyes and the yellow blemishes that are supposed to come with pregnancy. But she saw a flower-like reflection. She had grown slightly fatter; her breasts had assumed new curves; and everyone complimented her on her brilliant looks.

"A child," she said to herself, "is necessary to a woman's balance, to her health. We are made for it. Anyway I'm made for it."

The child you lull to sleep, the child you feed, whose cheek, fresh and soft as a fruit, you kiss, who opens wide eyes in which the universe dawns, laughs when you tickle it in its cradle, and whose fragile, dimpled body you would like to lick all over as do female animals, the child who stumbles, walks and grows . . .

"Why is it that so many women," she murmured, "can have children without its being a tragedy or a curse?"

A stone, another stone, a statue, a fountain . . .

A woman a few yards away was saying in a loud voice: "I've never seen Versailles looking more beautiful than it is today!"

A man was asking: "You're sure there'll only be one ballot?"

Why didn't Simon say to her: "Marie-Ange, keep the child. I ask you to, I want you to. It's mine too, and you haven't the right to dispose of it on your own. We'll bring it up together and we'll marry as soon as I'm free, and to hell with public opinion. What do we care for

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public opinion? I'll take the responsibility both for you and for the child."

Why didn't he talk like that, why didn't he take a decision, issue a command? Why, having played his male part, did he now abandon it?

"If he said that, no other considerations would count with me. And I should be happy. A solution would have been found. And that's what I really want. But he must say it, he must say it at once."

An identical battle was taking place in Simon. The desire for the child was perhaps even stronger in him than in Marie-Ange. "She'll be able to have others. For me this is perhaps the last chance." That this child might eventually resemble Jean-Noël, or even become an illegitimate waif like the little Lucienne Dual, were only risks and not certainties. Besides, the circumstances were not the same. But had he the right to ask it of Marie-Ange? He could imagine only too well the battle that was going on in her mind. As far as he was concerned, his part in the engagement was apparently but minor: it could resolve itself merely into a pecuniary obligation. For her there was physical suffering, moral suffering, a false social position. "And if I die before I can get a divorce, before I can recognize the child, or if war separates us—can one tell what's going to happen?—she will be left with a child on her hands, a life difficult to build up again, and a spoiled future. No, I haven't the right."

For the one time—for perhaps the only time in his egotistical life—that he put himself in someone else's place, he was doing exactly the opposite to what that person wanted of him, and to what would have made their joint happiness.

"She must decide. I don't want to force her into anything, nor influence her even."

Yet an ancient peasant instinct, or perhaps some form merely of simple male vanity, was astonished that respect for maternity, and desire for it, were not stronger than all else in Marie-Ange, were not expressed at least once by some question, some wish or some regret.

Groves, marbles and fountains; the huge rustling of the water hemmed their silence in on every side.

"The fact is she doesn't love me enough to want to keep a child of mine," thought Simon, suddenly giving way to the worst anguish in the world, the anguish of not being loved enough by the being one loves at the moment when love has the greatest opportunity of proving itself.

"The fact is he doesn't love me enough to ask me to give him a child by him," thought Marie-Ange.

And neither of them uttered the words they were each awaiting from the other.

"You know very well that I shall never leave you in the lurch," said

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Simon trying to be kind, finding nothing but this phrase that meant nothing and was just one more clumsiness.

"Oh yes, I know," she said.

Simon looked at his watch.

"I must go back to the session. Will you wait for me? We can go home together later."

"Oh, no," she said, "I'd rather go now, if you can have me driven home."

"Are you tired, darling?"

"Yes, a little."

On the way back Marie-Ange stopped the car at a cake-shop.

The dice were cast, the morality of the dead whom she carried in her blood had won in spite of her.

And Marie-Ange, alone, on the back seat of the car, wept long silent tears over the last chocolate éclairs she would eat for a long time.

XII

Meanwhile Jean-Noël and the Duchesse de Salvimonte were walking in the Grand Trianon gardens.

To all intents and purposes they had not been out of each other's sight for a fortnight.

They had gone together to the astrologer in the Rue Blomet, to whom Lydia had given a false date of birth for the purposes of her horoscope; she had then listened with passionate interest to a destiny ten years later than her own.

And the next day they had gone to the bank, and she had made Jean-Noël sign a document in which he guaranteed to return the money to her in three days' time. And in the evening they had gone to the Opéra. And the next day Lydia had seats for the first night at the Comédie Française.

And at the end of three days Jean-Noël had told her disconsolately that he was unable to pay her back.

And old Lydia had extended her loan for another three days, making him sign a further document. And so it had gone on until today, which was the fifth failure to repay. But now she no longer made him sign a document, but merely contented herself with giving him a verbal extension.

And in the meantime she insisted on the young man's accompanying her to amusements which he could not get out of; he followed her like a whippet on a lead to exhibitions, tea-shops and theatres.

People seeing them everywhere together, apparently inseparable, and knowing the friendships Jean-Noël had had in Italy, attributed the attachment to the homosexual taste for the company of old ladies.

When they had left the luncheon-table the Duchesse said to Jean-Noël:

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"Darling, I want to show you a part of the gardens I love very much, and which no one ever goes to see. The Château, the Great Park, the Étang des Suisses, are all very grandiose and rather obvious. Everyone knows them. Come with me."

Walking with what she believed to be a young woman's step, though her desiccated ankles did not obey her very well, she led Jean-Noël through the Trianon gardens, enthusing over Versailles as people do who are not French-born, as a Frenchman may enthuse over Rome.

And Jean-Noël, who knew the Villa d'Este, Caprarolla, the Tuscan villas and the Umbrian country-houses, was forced to recognize that the masterpiece of Italy, of her architecture, her gardens and her fountains, had been achieved here by artists who had learned in her school and were steeped in her influence.

Jean-Noël and Lydia were at the far end of the left wing of the Grand Trianon, in front of that little façade in whose centre a faun's head laughs.

"How divinely proportioned it is, and at the same time so sensual. You might think," the Salvimonte cried, indicating the exquisitely light double-staircase, "you might think that a king and queen, who have just been making love, will come down those stairs at any moment to walk in the garden!"

She pointed to the oblong basin, lined with marble, and the lead fountain at its centre, where an infant Bacchus had felled a lion cub and was trying to make it eat grapes.

The crowd from the Congress had not reached this retreat; its fairy-like quality was theirs alone.

Jean-Noël thought this was the moment to make his bi-weekly apology.

"Dearest Lydia, I'm embarrassed," he said. "I promise you that for the last three days I've unceasingly . . ."

He took refuge in a fog of lies, offering once more a mortgage on Mauglaives.

The Salvimonte barely listened to him.

Suddenly she stopped and turned towards him.

"But don't you understand, darling, that I don't care a damn about the money?" she cried, looking into his eyes.

Jean-Noël raised his eyebrows in happy surprise.

"Don't you understand anything at all?" she went on. "Why do you think I made you sign those miserable documents? Do you really think I'm capable of that sort of meanness? If I made you sign them, it was only that I might be sure of seeing you at least once every three days! My God, how stupid men are, one has to explain everything to them!"

If Jean-Noël had not exactly guessed the reason for the short-term extensions, he nevertheless was perfectly aware of the old Duchesse's feelings towards him. During the last fortnight they had exhausted all

the generalities concerning love, art and society that it was possible for a man and a woman to exchange, when they have really nothing to say to each other and are separated by more than half a century in age.

Jean-Noël knew that the moment would come when the question of more definite endearments would arise.

The Salvimonte was like that Princesse de Metternich who, when asked at what age a woman ceased to be tormented by the flesh, replied: "I don't know, I'm only sixty-five."

When they were together in the car the old woman had a way of setting herself against Jean-Noël, making contact with her arthritic leg and her garter that left the young man in no doubt, and terrified him.

But he hoped that, in spite of these little advances, there existed a modesty in old age comparable to the shyness of early adolescence.

"But really, *caro*," she went on, "what are you waiting for? You've been seeing me continuously for the last fortnight. At first it was only because of the money. But now I realize that you can no longer do without me. So what are you waiting for, darling? Do I have to encourage you? You should avail yourself of me while I'm still a desirable woman! I've not all that much time left, alas! I have here, here," she went on, beating her withered breasts, "treasures of youth that no man has understood!"

"I've played my part too well," Jean-Noël thought. "But I don't see how I could have done less if she was to forget the two hundred and fifty thousand francs."

Concerned at what attitude to adopt now, he did not realize the painful state of hope that a fortnight of his company had aroused in the old woman.

"Dearest Lydia, I have the very greatest affection for you. But you know very well I don't like women. I like men," he said, hypocritically, lowering his head and tracing vague lines on the gravel of the avenue with the point of his shoe.

"But it's not true, darling!" she cried. "You had the Sandoval, and then the Rocapolli in Venice, so I've been told."

"Yes, precisely, and they were unhappy experiences."

"But only because you happened to fall in with impossible creatures, *poveretto*. One's lame and the other's an ape! And they're young women who think of no one but themselves. But I guarantee I shall convert you. I have both intuition and experience in love."

They were at the edge of the basin. Two dragonflies were coupling on a water-lily leaf.

"Look at them!" said the Salvimonte, her voice hoarse.

"She's crazy and mad!" thought Jean-Noël.

He turned his eyes from the dragonflies to the old Duchesse.

She was hideous and pathetic. The blood had mounted to her

sagging cheeks. Her sparse eyelashes, daubed with mascara, were bedewed with a senile watering of the eyes.

And for the first time in his life Jean-Noël felt that he was stronger than the person with whom he was face to face, felt that he had someone entirely at his mercy.

Behind a screen of water the young Bacchus was crushing the lead grapes into the lion's mouth.

"But, *tesoro*, you're a normal boy, I mean physically?" said the Salvimonte in a low voice but with no less ardour.

"Yes," said Jean-Noël. "But there's just one thing. I can do nothing, I'm incapable of thinking about love, when I have no money."

And it was true.

"But, my angel, I've got money, you know that very well," said the Salvimonte. "And I always say: 'When there's enough for one, there's enough for two.' Besides, I'm the giving sort, I'm made that way! I should like to remove all your anxieties, if that's what prevents your being virile! Let's see, how much do you want?"

Jean-Noël made no reply. He was calculating. "A million, can I ask her for a million? But then I should really have to do something about it, because the two hundred and fifty thousand francs were no more than *hors d'œuvre*. But this time . . . I wonder if I really could."

"Oh, you know, my treasure, when I saw you the first time, at that ball two years ago," she said, "and you asked me to dance—or perhaps I asked you, I don't remember—well, I knew there was something electric between us. The shock, I felt the shock, do you know that? And that day you came in my gondola with me, at poor Pemrose's funeral, on that journey across the lagoon to the cemetery—it's one of the most exquisite memories of my life!" Her desiccated bust heaved with girlish emotion.

"How long can she still have to live?" Jean-Noël wondered.

"What a wonderful time I want to give you, darling!" she went on. "We can go and live in my Italian palaces. I can take you round the world. You can have everything with me!"

He bowed his head as if reflecting deeply. Then raised it in a gesture of dignified sorrow.

"No, Lydia, don't tempt me. It's impossible," he said. "You must understand, I can't be kept by you, I can't. What sort of figure would I cut?"

"What do other people's opinions matter where there is love? Are you really still young enough to mind?"

"It's not other people's opinions, it's my opinion of myself. I should despise myself. Besides, I have to think of my future. For a few months I'd have a marvellous life. But what would happen afterwards? I must make a career for myself. And then I've got to look after my sister. We're two penniless orphans, my dear Lydia."

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He was trying to extract a gift, or the promise of a legacy. He was endeavouring to hint at something of the kind. Then suddenly he had an idea. Why should not Lydia adopt Marie-Ange, or himself? Unconsciously he continued to look on her as a grandmother.

"Well, darling, in that case . . ." said the Salvimonte, becoming suddenly serious.

And Jean-Noël had a moment of panic, thinking she was climbing down, recovering her common sense.

"Well, in that case, and I say it very solemnly, why don't you marry me? You know every woman wants marriage. And as a widow I know what it means."

For ten seconds Jean-Noël was overcome with stupefaction.

"Of course that's the best solution," she went on, becoming lyrical again. "Your position will then be an honourable one. And I shan't be keeping you like a gigolo. It will be an association. All this money that bores me so much to look after, the solicitors, the properties, the stewards; it's all man's work. And it's a career, I can assure you of that! I'm just made for love and nothing else."

All her own fortune and all Ben's fortune she had just inherited—Jean-Noël was busy reducing the miracle to figures.

He'd be mad, he thought, not to seize the opportunity since it was offered him.

The ridicule such a marriage would attract? "Forty millions are never ridiculous," he thought. He felt that he was blessed of the gods. And he could always play the card of chastity till the wedding-day. After that he would have to see.

He let the old Duchesse go on talking for several minutes to win the consent that, in fact, was hers already.

"Well, darling?" she asked.

"I think, darling, that we shall never forget this faun, this lion and this garden," Jean-Noël replied. He was already playing his part, selling her for hundredweights of gold a worthless illusion of love.

The eyelashes trembled beneath their melting mascara. She hoisted herself up to him to offer her mouth.

"This is the second most wonderful day in my life," she said. "And I think I've forgotten the other."

They left the garden. As he followed her, he thought: "If I have any luck she won't live for more than another two or three years."

The Duchesse was sprightly as a young girl, but her legs responded ill.

She tripped over the edge of a pavement. Jean-Noël just caught her before she fell head-first on the stone. Dismay at seeing his hopes realized too soon lent him a vigour the Salvimonte took for love.

"You see," she said coaxingly, taking his arm, "how much I need you."

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XIII

It was not quite five o'clock when a valet in the Hôtel Trianon came hurrying down from the third floor and whispered to the manager.

The manager immediately sent for the head porter.

"Is there a doctor here? Send for a doctor at once."

Then, seeing Lartois having tea in the gallery with a number of ladies, he went to him and said: "Excuse me, Monsieur le Professeur, perhaps if you would come . . . Monsieur Wilner . . ."

They went up in the lift.

As they hurried down the corridor they saw two housemaids and a valet whispering outside the door.

Lartois and the manager went into the suite.

Eduard Wilner was sitting at his desk, his body collapsed, his forehead fallen on his papers. The back of his huge head, so like a sacred bull's, seemed offered up to all the light of the windows. His hand hung down over the arm of his chair. His fountain-pen had fallen on to the carpet, which was absorbing the ink.

Lartois raised the head. It was already cold, huge and dangling, inert as a piece of butcher's meat, heavy as a marble bust.

The eyelids were half-closed over the glassy eyes, the nostrils, on which the whole weight of the head had rested, were crushed against the bone, as if the carelessness of the centuries had already broken the statue's nose.

There was a little ink on the eyebrow where it had touched the paper.

"It's all over," said Lartois, "and has been for at least half an hour. There's nothing to be done but carry him to the bed."

Lartois looked at the dramatist's huge, black, rapid writing that sprawled, sprinkled with commas, over the white sheets of paper.

"I reply seven days, so as not to spend more time on it than God needed to create the Universe."

The manuscript ended there. But it was not on that page that Wilner had been working.

The sheet of paper over which he had collapsed was a half-page cut, as if from a habit of economy, for the making of a note.

And on this little sheet, Lartois read: "Lucienne is coming at five o'clock. Lucienne has beautiful buttocks. All girls' buttocks . . ."

The appalling and incoherent obscenity of the lines that followed brought a pained frown to Lartois's brow. He discreetly slipped the shocking page into his pocket so that literary history might not be deprived of the splendid legend of the dramatist collapsing over his work at the very moment when he was comparing love to the creation of the world.

"I was just bringing him his tea as usual. And found him like this," the valet explained.

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The room had filled with members of the staff.

"It's really most unfortunate that he should have died here," thought the manager.

Meanwhile he was giving orders for secrecy so that the other guests might not be alarmed.

It took four men to carry the dramatist's body from the table to the bed.

Lartois's fingers could still feel the weight, the very shape of the heavy head he had raised, the brain that had contained, created and constructed a half-imaginary world, the great forehead beneath the short, white hair that had sheltered the most ruthless observation of the men of its time, and the most pitiless analysis of itself.

A woman's voice, naïve and a little drawling, said: "Hullo, what's going on?"

Lartois raised his eyes and saw among the faces of the staff a tall, rather beautiful girl with thick brown hair.

"Is your name Lucienne?" he asked. "He won't need you any more."

Even after decades and decades of seeing people die in the course of his profession, he still did not understand. He did not understand the alliance between the highest forms of activity and the lowest forms of obsession, and why they continued till the ultimate moment. But in any case why make these judgments of "highest" and "lowest?" They had no more significance than a label saying "this side up" on a box of china. They were merely an empirical precaution for transporting through life a fragile cargo that, in any case, must be broken in the end.

That Wilner, the greatest hypochondriac of his time, should have died so suddenly, left Lartois perplexed.

"It looks like a symbol, but an inexplicable symbol. It's this utter ignorance that preserves for one an illusion of being young. It's because we're as ill-equipped and as avid for understanding as we were in our adolescence that we continue to delude ourselves. To be old is to see the people we love dying one by one around us. And we have nothing else to do, while we wait to rejoin them, but ask ourselves the questions they have failed to answer, and that we shall fail to answer too."

Life in the rest of the hotel went on. The little red light-signals on the telephone exchange went on and off like ideas in a brain. The bar-men shook their mixtures in the silver cocktail-shakers. The cooks were preparing food for dinner.

Meanwhile, preceded by squadrons of the guard and white-gloved motor-cyclists, the re-elected President, saluting the crowd from the back of his open car, was returning to the capital. And the whole procession of ambition, intrigue, passion, hatred and vanity followed him between the ranks of the applauding populace.

The man who had analysed, reconstructed and recorded for the future all these vanities, passions and intrigues, was no more than a heavy corpse stretched out on a bed.

Professor Lartois turned away to the window that they might not see his tears.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Return to Mauglaives

THE builders were on the roofs of Mauglaives. The painters were whistling on their ladders in the galleries. Tall scaffolding had been erected in front of the façades. The cracks were being secured with iron pins that looked like sutures. The courtyards were heaped with tiles.

Throughout the day Jean-Noël walked about the building in riding-breeches. Christian Leluc, a scarf about his neck, generally accompanied him. Jean-Noël had been delighted to invite the young pianist to spend the summer at Mauglaives so as to infuriate Lydia. But then, Christian had taste. Both Jean-Noël and he had been educated in the school of the Three Bees. And the two young men were enjoying a splendid building-game, with real turrets, real walls and real ceilings.

"I see the Marshals' Gallery with bright yellow panelling picked out in gold, and the furniture covered in royal blue, the blue of the Order of Saint Louis, a startling contrast," said Leluc.

And then suddenly there would be trouble.

"Who told you to pick out that moulding in mauve?" Jean-Noël would say to the painters.

"Monsieur Leluc, Monsieur le Baron . . ."

"Monsieur Leluc does not give orders. Take it out and make it cherry-coloured, as we decided."

And Leluc would sulk for half a day.

The workmen hated this black insect, this sort of spider who fell constantly among them, by what thread no one could tell, and whose orders had half the time to be obeyed, and half the time not, who made sneaking reports to Jean-Noël, though he was sometimes snubbed by him.

Nor did the workmen like Jean-Noël, who had no gift for command. They were shocked by the waste of time and materials, exasperated at having to be polite and attentive while Jean-Noël and Christian held interminable discussions, patterns of stuffs in their hands.

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And indeed who did give orders in the house?

Jean-Noël had just received a letter from his cousin Valleroy. "I must admit," wrote the Duc, "that we were rather surprised by your marriage. But since your wife's fortune will allow you to reopen Mauglaives and restore it, it's a decision I cannot but approve . . ."

Your wife. Jean-Noël could not accustom himself to the fact that Lydia was his wife.

But who could accustom themselves to it?

Léontine Laverdure, her eyes blinking and her voice shrill, had made no bones about saying to Jean-Noël: "As far as we're concerned, Madame la Baronne was Monsieur's mother. But now the new Madame la Baronne is a person who could have been the mother of Monsieur, and that's something no one can accept."

Laverdure, older, white-haired, heavier, still holding the position of steward, took things more quietly.

"You know, Mother, we've seen so many strange things in our time . . ." he said to his wife.

Jean-Noël had completely forgotten that he owed the old huntsman two years' wages, and it was Marie-Ange who had to remind him of it.

But who took thought for other people?

Lydia, Lydia Schoudler, Madame Jean-Noël, sunbathed entirely naked on a part of the lawn she had reserved to herself, where hedges theoretically protected her from view. But theoretically only. For though she might not be visible from the paths, she was in full view of the builders and masons working on the walls of the towers. Recumbent on an orange mattress, she had pretended, during the first days, to ignore the workmen. But now her dark glances were directed frankly towards them, while she smeared her elderly goat-like limbs with sun-tan oil.

"Christ, at her age!" said the workmen. "The old bitch is paying for the lot. You'd think she could manage to buy herself a pair of pants. And what with them all going to Mass on Sundays!"

When she had warmed herself in the August sun and the men's glances, Lydia, dressed like a young girl at the seaside, would go to aggravate the chaos of the redecoration.

Aunt Isabelle, who had nowhere else to spend the holidays, had taken charge of the domestic arrangements, which consisted in changing the menus a dozen times a day, for she had reached such a state of indecision that she no longer knew even what she wanted to eat. And she imagined that, by doing so, she was devoting herself once again to the family, since this strange niece-by-marriage, who was seventy-two years old and had been wished on, her, was incapable of running the house herself, while Marie-Ange, whose duty it should have been, appeared to take no interest in anything. "Poor little Marie-Ange! She should make an effort all the same. She's really taking her misfortune very

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badly," Isabelle thought. "I really showed more pluck when it happened to me. It's so lucky I'm here to give her moral support. Otherwise I really don't know who would look after her."

II

Marie-Ange was turning the letter they had brought her over and over in her fingers. It was a letter from Simon. Should she open it or tear it up without reading it, as she had the previous ones?

Not to open the letter meant an effort of will, an exhausting effort. Four months had elapsed; despair and indignation had given place to prostration in Marie-Ange. Simon's perseverance moved her a little. If she gave way to opening his letter, she would expose herself to be melted by a memory, a phrase; she would give way first to replying, then to seeing Simon again, since her life held nothing else. And that she must not do, for it was absurd and could lead to nothing but a patching-up, a restoration, like Lydia's face, like the façade of Mau-glaives. She was surrounded by patching up. Emotions were surely more fragile than old stones and old faces.

The surgical operation that had freed Marie-Ange from the child she was carrying had not gone well. A serious haemorrhage had been the immediate consequence and nervous collapse the long-term sequel.

Marie-Ange envied the girls she had known at Marcel Germain's, who reappeared in the dressing-room the day after an abortion and bore their lovers no grudge.

She would never have believed that her body could set so much store by the child. Nor that her love for Simon would be destroyed with it.

As if awakening from a long intoxication, her head a prey to migraine, aware of a sensation of disgust and shame, she saw Simon as he really was, ugly of face and body, too old for her, selfish, the slave of the life he had lived, a martyr to his own power, subject to the rules of a man who spent his days in the public eye and was constrained by his past actions. "Why should I have to pay for what he did or was before I knew him?" She thought it unfair that her part should be so heavy and Simon's so light.

The links that sometimes so mysteriously and incomprehensibly unite for a moment of life two people, for whom there is no reason to suppose a common destiny, were now dissolved, at least as far as she was concerned.

Marie-Ange, though still ill, had risen from her bed to attend her brother's fantastic wedding. And that night, more depressed than ever, she had stayed with Isabelle and told her haltingly of what had happened to her.

"How absurd!" Marie-Ange thought as she talked to her. "I was

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terrified at the idea of confessing it to her earlier, and yet, now that it's all over, here I am telling her about it. It's absurd . . ."

And Aunt Isabelle not only delighted at being able to flutter on the periphery of the drama, but overjoyed at the opportunity of talking of herself, had replied: "It's terrible, my poor child. And I can very well understand what you must have suffered, because I, too, you see, a long, long time ago . . . There has never been any reason to tell you. One keeps these things to oneself, except in moments like this, between women. But in my case it took a different course to yours. Your grandmother married me to poor Olivier. Pointlessly too, as things turned out, since I had a natural miscarriage. But in any case my life was spoilt . . . I too have had my romance."

What? Stout Aunt Isabelle, compressed into her corsets, with her pepper-and-salt hair and her tortoiseshell spectacles, Aunt Isabelle the irreproachable!

"The man who made me pregnant," Isabelle had added confidentially, "was Simon Lachaume. You're surprised! If I'd been cleverer I might today perhaps be a Minister's wife. But he was married. I feared the scandal."

Marie-Ange had made no reply. But the revelation had been the last blow, a mortal, irreparable wound. "He might at least have told me," she thought, "and not aped the emotion of a man to whom this has happened for the first time."

And everyone had left for Mauglaives, whose restoration had been Jean-Noël's wedding present; and there they found themselves living in a builder's yard.

Isabelle was rather surprised at Marie-Ange's reserve towards her. Here at Mauglaives she seemed to be happy only in the company of the Laverdures. But she could not spend her life in the old huntsman's cottage. So she stayed nearly all day shut up in her room, the Chamber of Diane, that fabulous room, hung with the tapestries displaying countless little golden figures, in which her mother had been murdered. Marie-Ange had insisted on having this particular room, not only from some obscure nostalgia for calamity, but also so that Lydia might not occupy it.

The balustrade of the balcony from which Laverdure had hurled the fragile body down had been rebuilt of new stone.

Marie-Ange read novels and the newspapers in which banner headlines announced the deteriorating international situation. From time to time she ran across the name of Lachaume.

"On the occasion of a banquet given at Jeumont by the Mayors of his constituency, the ex-Minister for War made an extensive tour of the political horizon and declared in particular that . . ."

Then she thought of the house at Jeumont.

Or again, as today, she turned a letter from Simon about in her fingers for an hour or more before tearing it up. For indeed it was difficult not to yield to the temptation of reading it when the weeks were passing, the days hardening like the tissues of a cyst about her past suffering, and nothing new happened.

It was Saturday, noon had just struck, and the noise of hammers, planes and trowels ceased along the façades and on the roofs, in the courtyards and the drawing-rooms.

And Marie-Ange heard the sound of raised voices, of one more quarrel between Jean-Noël and Lydia, or rather the same quarrel continuing endlessly, as they threw in each others faces with appalling cynicism figures of money and of age. Jean-Noël complained that he had been "done" because Lydia had insisted on keeping their property separate on marriage. And Lydia considered herself "done" for other reasons.

Marie-Ange heard shouted insults in the passage, then the door of her room opened and Lydia came in, tears in her eyes, her mahogany-coloured hair, grey at the roots, coming down. She was wearing a thin, red-and-yellow flowered dress that was atrociously revealing of her breasts and shoulders under its meagre straps.

"Oh, my dear, my dear," she cried, dabbing at her eyes, "your brother is really so horrible to me. Do you know what he's refusing me now? My bathroom was to have Pompeian mosaics and he says it'll be ugly. And is what he's doing with his horrid little Leluc, whose filthy presence has been forced on me, going to look any better? Have I no right to have what I want? It's all costing me enough, this craziness of repairing an old château when I've got four palaces in Italy! And what am I doing it all for? Nothing, do you hear? Nothing! Your brother's impotent, didn't you know? I've married an impotent boy. And he refuses to go to a doctor out of sheer malice. I shall end by sleeping with the masons, just out of revenge! And now the monster's stolen my passport and won't give it back!"

Three days earlier the door of her room being somewhat difficult to open, Lydia had believed that Jean-Noël had locked her in. She had made a romantic attempt to escape by the window and the scaffolding, announcing that she was going to ask the Pope for an annulment on the grounds of non-consummation of the marriage. They had had to go and rescue her as she sat astride a beam half-way between earth and sky. As a result Jean-Noël had confiscated her identity papers.

"In the first place I want my passport back," she said, rising to her feet and leaving the room as suddenly as she had entered it.

And Marie-Ange heard her shouting in the passages: "Jean-Noël! I must have my passport!"

In the old woman's presence Marie-Ange felt a curious mixture of pity, shame and disgust.

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"After all, we're all living on her, not only Jean-Noël but Isabelle and I too. Jean-Noël's family-feeling seems to go no further than squeezing money out of the wretched woman, and he's driving her off her head. Perhaps that's what he really wants. To have her shut up. Our grandparents down there under the chapel must be turning in their graves at seeing how low we've fallen."

Simon's letter was still lying in front of her. What could it contain? She would never know, for she seized the envelope, tore it into eight pieces, and so as not to yield to the temptation of putting the pieces together again burnt it in the fireplace. But she knew it was the last time she would have this negative courage.

She must prevent another letter arriving.

She wrote a brief note telling Simon of the fate that awaited his letters.

"Be charitable enough to help me forget you altogether by your silence," she wrote. "You may be used to things like this. I'm not. My nerves are shattered. And they take longer to mend than bones."

III

The Curé went into the pulpit and cleared his voice before the open register. In clerical tones he said: "As is our custom every week, we shall pray today for the dead, and above all for the benefactors of this church, the Marquis de Mauglaives and de La Monnerie, the Baron and Baronne Schoudler, as well as for the past Curés of this parish, Angevin, Vollard and Guillaumet, and for the Delafosse, Grossein, Vanier, Paternos-Legendre, Passé, Leroux and Boissel families. Our Father which art in Heaven . . ."

And all the Boissels, Leroux, Passés, Grosseins and Delafosses among the congregation, the old women in coifs, the younger women in black hats, the little girls in cotton stockings, the boys with pink knees, the men with heavily creased necks, their backs ramrod-stiff in their tightly fitting Sunday coats, indeed the whole village, murmured the Lord's Prayer.

In the château pew Jean-Noël, Lydia, Marie-Ange and Isabelle were standing side by side.

"And today, my very dear brothers," continued the Curé, "I ask you to make a special prayer on behalf of those among you who have been recalled these last days to the army. Let us pray to God that He will shorten the absence of your dear ones, and let us ask Him from the bottom of our hearts, with all the fervour at our command, to spare our dear country the horrors of another war. We will repeat an act of faith and an act of hope to this intention . . ."

Jean-Noël was horror-stricken, not at the thought of war, but at the realization that he had completely forgotten his childhood prayers.

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Was it really as long ago as that? He had made his first communion in this village; he had been confirmed here. He had taken the collection with Marie-Ange on Saint Hubert's Day. It was not that he wanted to recite the prayers "with all the fervour at his command" as the Curé asked; but he could not understand how the words had escaped him. As, surrounded by children solving an arithmetical problem, one can feel overwhelmed with an appalling loneliness because one no longer remembers simple arithmetic, so Jean-Noël, confronted with the kneeling villagers and unable to follow their murmurings, felt isolated, menaced, like a fragile kite at the end of a string about to break.

To justify a marriage that was shameful both in his own eyes and in those of others, he had wanted to assume the traditional position of Lord of the Manor, and yet now he was not even capable of sharing the villagers' propitiatory murmurings.

How far removed he was from all these people, and how just it was that he should read in their eyes when he met them that he was no more than a gimcrack "Monsieur le Baron"; how far removed he was from them, from their earth, their customs, their church, their resigned faith—"God must exist for, if not, what else is there?"—from their beliefs and their hopes learned, once and for all, by heart!

How far removed he was from these little magic orisons that filled their minds, these recipes for every circumstance that had never yet prevented a massacre nor succeeded in bringing rain in years of drought, and which, nevertheless, they had continued to use through fifty generations. Thanksgiving by the conquerors, contrition by the conquered. An act of hope while waiting to become the one or the other. "God sends us these trials to expiate our sins. Let us offer Him our sufferings . . ."

"God has been consistent in never caring a damn about them," Jean-Noël thought, "and I come and take my place here merely to support the lie. And when I think that she"—and he glanced at Lydia beside him with hatred—"made me go through a religious marriage!"

"She" was reciting in Italian an act of hope on behalf of Jean-Noël, that he might recover his virility. And she was simultaneously making up her mind to appeal to the Pope if this hope were not realized within a week.

Marie-Ange looked towards the door whenever a latecomer came in. "This is what I've become. 'I'm like one of these country girls waiting every moment of their lives for a fiancé, a match to appear. It's absurd.' She gazed at Jean-Noël. "If he weren't my brother, if I didn't know him, I should most certainly want him to take an interest in me. Indeed, it's for someone like him I'm waiting, merely to be unhappy all over again. He really is beautiful in this half-light. Is it because he's my brother that I conceive male beauty in his image?"

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Aunt Isabelle, like all women who no longer have to suffer on anyone's account, was gathering the sufferings of the whole universe to herself, lamenting the dear dead, the dear absent in the armies, the dear threatened country . . .

"And yet," Jean-Noël thought as he listened in boredom to the Mass, "and yet there are people who believe in God, people who practise their religion, and who aren't fools."

He thought of Pem, and remembered the note in the margin of Saint Catherine of Genoa: "Hell is on earth and each one of us inflicts his own punishment on himself." "Why," Jean-Noël wondered, "am I unhappy?"

To all appearance he had no reason to be. He was compelled to recognize that, if he was unhappy, it was because of his self-contempt and his inability to act in any way that did not deserve it.

IV

The quarrel, the same old quarrel had begun all over again, because Lydia refused to sign the cheques for the builders and decorators.

"I shan't pay another penny till you give me back my passport," she cried.

"I shall give it back to you only when you've signed the documents for the solicitors."

"I shan't sign them till the marriage has been consummated. No, I shan't!"

"Very well then, you won't get your passport."

"I shall go and complain to my ambassador."

"You have no ambassador, you became French by your marriage."

"But since you're not a husband there's no marriage."

She was changing her clothes, removing those she had worn for Mass before putting on one of her young girl's dresses. She was standing naked before Jean-Noël and was seeking every pretext—a touch of the comb to her hair, a dusting of talcum powder to her withered flanks—to remain so as long as possible.

From the front she looked appallingly ancient. From the back she still looked like a woman.

"Come on, be nice, do as I ask you," said Jean-Noël with a curious calm that might have been either kindly or threatening.

"But I want nothing better than to be nice, if you'd only be so too."

She went and clung to him, encircling him with her arms, and suddenly started back in triumph.

"You see you're not impotent!" she cried. "Do you pretend to be only to make me suffer?"

Was it the effect of long chastity or was the horrible a stimulus in itself? Jean-Noël wondered. In any case he realized that he must go

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through with it now because the old woman would become extravagantly hysterical. And he derived a sort of morbid pleasure at the thought of the scene he had already planned in all its details.

He took a quarter of an hour undressing, which he did with perverse slowness. He interrupted the process to fondle the old woman's back with a dexterous hand, rationing his caresses, abandoning them with cunning, wicked subtlety, allowing himself to be caressed in his turn only to disengage himself at once till he had reduced Lydia to a state of utter frenzy.

She groaned and hiccupped and muttered incoherently in a trilingual vocabulary of love; she fell at Jean-Noël's feet, clasped his legs and dragged herself about the room on her knees. Jean-Noël savoured the hideous spectacle she presented, the appalling deformation of her features, the madness of her eye, the gestures of her old limbs. She was at once the witch and the faggot, contorted by the fire she bore within her.

He dragged her to the looking-glass.

"Now, look at yourself," he said, "just look at yourself!"

"Oh, yes! Oh yes! I see myself!" she cried, in ecstasies at her own reflection.

"She really might kill herself, getting into such a state at her age," thought Jean-Noël.

He left her to go into his own room.

"Jean-Noël, *tesoro, amore mio*, don't go away. Oh don't!" she cried in a voice hoarse with anguish. "You can't do a thing like that to me!"

"All right, all right, I'm not going away. I'm coming back at once," he replied.

There was a sound of a drawer opening and shutting.

"*Amore mio, amore mio, amore mio*," she kept hiccupping.

She was still on her knees on the gleaming inlaid parquet.

Jean-Noël returned. He was carrying legal documents and a fountain-pen.

"Oh, no, not now, afterwards!" Lydia groaned.

"No, before," he said.

He put the papers down in front of her on the parquet and forced the pen into her hand.

The document was an act of gift *inter vivos* with remainder to the last survivor.

"Sign," he said.

"You beast, you little beast," she said.

Her eyes were misty with tears. She signed.

"And now this one," said Jean-Noël, producing a second document.

It was a complementary deed to the first, by which Marie-Ange had the reversion of the gift.

Lydia again tried to protest.

THE RETURN TO MAUGLAIVES

"After, *dopo*," she repeated.

"Sign," said Jean-Noël, pressing down on the old woman's shoulders as she knelt before him.

He could feel the thin collar-bones under his fingers; by pressing a little harder he could have broken them.

He was taking his revenge, taking his revenge at one blow on all the old who had despoiled and ruined his sister and himself. He was taking his revenge on all the ancestors who had delivered them up, their heredity weakened and impoverished, to a universe in which they could not compete. He was recovering at one blow the fifty millions that should have been their family inheritance; he was obtaining restitution of the fortune for which he had been brought up and without which he was no more than a cripple.

"Put your initials in the margin against the erasure."

"How hard you're pressing on my shoulders, how lovely . . ." Lydia was saying.

He was taking his revenge for the kisses of the old upon his infant cheeks, he was taking his revenge for the death of his great-grandfather Siegfried, who had collapsed in his nursery; he was taking his revenge for the fear in which he had held his grandfather, the giant Noël; he was taking his revenge on this hysterical old woman for Inès's old lovers whose conversation in the bathroom had blighted love for him.

He knew that he was abject; he savoured his abjection.

He knew that he was the stronger, with the strength of a child who tears the wings from a fly.

"And now this one; come on, sign! It's the last."

It was a general power of attorney to the bank covering all personal and real estate.

By signing Lydia was endorsing her complete spoliation.

"You wanted to have me at your mercy by your contract of separation of property. This'll teach you, this'll teach you!" thought Jean-Noël.

He caressed her back, he caressed the millions stuck to her old hide.

"Oh, how lovely . . . again," she moaned.

The most beautiful girl with the freshest of skins could have aroused no greater carnal stimulus in Jean-Noël than did this haggard old woman with desiccated breasts who clung to his calves.

She gazed, panting and fascinated, at the signs he displayed of unflinching virility.

"You're the man . . . you give the orders," she said.

And she signed the last document.

"Now come," she said, "come."

There was a quality of madness in her entreaty.

Jean-Noël had thought to complete his revenge by leaving her thus, while he held the signatures. But his nerves clamoured for gratification.

His mind too was confused. He turned her about so as not to see the grimaces on that patched-up face . . .

V

Jean-Noël met Christian Leluc in the passage.

"Go and see the old woman," he said as he passed. "Then you'll be a witness that the marriage has been consummated."

And he went on his way.

He had the signed documents in his pocket. He was the master of an enormous fortune. "What now?" he wondered.

Now he felt an overpowering disgust.

He went into Marie-Ange's room. She was lying in bed, tired once again, tired of having nothing to do, tired of having neither love nor hope.

"Here you are," said Jean-Noël, putting the documents on her bedside table. "Put these away and hide them properly. We're rich at last, and I haven't forgotten you."

From her brother's expression Marie-Ange realized what had happened and made no reply.

She did not judge him; she was sorry for him. And because he had thought of securing her material existence too, she shared in his shame, feeling herself an accomplice in a crime that was defined in no article of the criminal code.

Jean-Noël went and leaned against the balustrade of the balcony. Above him clematis, roses and honeysuckle mingled their flowers about the eaves, and the great park lay spread out beneath the late August sun, its grass ready for a second crop of hay, its groves of elms and copper-beeches.

"And this is what it all boils down to," thought Jean-Noël; "I'm the descendant of the Marshals of Mauglaives, I'm the great-nephew of General de La Monnerie, and I get myself made chauffeur to a Minister and, what's more, a Minister who's my sister's lover.

"I'm the descendant of a family who have given countless bishops and cardinals to the Church, and I no longer even know my prayers, even lack the refuge of a belief in God.

"I bear the name of a dynasty of European bankers and I've issued dud cheques and live like a gigolo.

"I'm the grandson of a poet whose loves were famous, and I've been the twenty-fifth lover of an elderly poetess, honeymooned in Italy with an old homosexual, and now I'm married to a woman of seventy-two.

"My father was honest, brave and true, and he killed himself. And my mother was worthy, pious and virtuous, and she was killed—here.

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"And there are men who till the soil, the soil of my ancestors, *my* soil, and I don't understand them, they don't like me and I don't like them . . ."

And there were also people who were building dams, designing aircraft, discovering the causes of mental diseases under microscopes, planning a new universe, preaching revolution. Jean-Noël knew very well that truth lay with them, but it was a truth that was inaccessible to him. Society had not designed him for such things. Society had created him merely to prolong a world that existed no longer, or practically no longer. To be without dreams, ambition, aptitude or vocation, with nothing to give his contemporaries, and therefore nothing to expect from them, cut off from the moorings of the past, with no oars to attain the future, he was adrift in time. Was that what was meant by being the end of a line?

"Jean-Noël," Marie-Ange called softly.

He went to her, and sat on the edge of the bed.

"Don't give way to despair," she said; "you've plenty of time to be happy in."

She had forgotten the imminence of war.

And now, for the first time, she saw Jean-Noël, with a sort of sad surprise, no longer as the little brother who did silly things, but as a man who was prey to a crisis of conscience, a man who was suddenly oppressed by life as if it were an indignity.

And, as a woman does when trying to console a man in his suffering, she pulled his head down gently to her shoulder.

It was hot. Marie-Ange was naked under the worn linen sheet that had come from the ancestral linen-room. Jean-Noël felt better with his forehead against her warm shoulder. He stayed thus for several minutes, then raised his head and looked at Marie-Ange. Had he ever looked at her so attentively and so close?

He had never noticed on that beautiful face the tiny wrinkle, the minute line barely incised as yet at the corner of the eyelid, nor the hardly perceptible curve beneath the jaw.

"She'll have something of a double chin; there'll be a deeper shadow at her nostrils," he thought. He studied the planes of her face where the hollow would come, the places where the skin would grow loose, where the symmetry would fail. Had he been able to draw, he could have made an accurate likeness of what she would be in thirty or thirty-five years' time.

How did she know what he was gazing at, what he was thinking?

"You're thinking what I'll be like when I'm old," she said.

He wanted to reassure her; he did what a man does to assure a woman of her beauty. He kissed her and, quite naturally, kissed the mouth whose future deformation he had just perceived.

But it was not a kiss of brother and sister; it was the kiss of man and

woman, and their two mouths responded to each other because it was their rôle and their business to respond.

Jean-Noël and Marie-Ange stared at each other, eye to eye, a little surprised.

A strange emotion had been born between them. The twittering of a bird outside seemed unexpectedly important in a silence that was unreally prolonged.

Was Jean-Noël lucid and in control of his hand when he placed it gently, so gently on his sister's breast?

After what had happened a few rooms away and but an hour before, was his body demanding some requital from youth?

His male fingers followed the curved and supple density of her beautiful breast, and were arrested at the rounded nipple. Marie-Ange had closed her eyes, and the shadow of her lashes fell across her cheek.

She reopened her eyes and looked at Jean-Noël with an almost imperceptible dismay, a questioning that found no answer.

When Jean-Noël's hand began to move down her body, that body which had been chaste for too many weeks, Marie-Ange closed her eyes again and a rosy flush of consent spread across her face.

Having learned by bitter experience, she had merely the presence of mind to murmur: "Be careful, I implore you."

And the incest, to which, without their being aware of it, they had been destined since childhood, was accomplished; an incest that was a return to the silence of the womb, that was a sleep and a forgetting.

The flesh is rarely in perfect accord. No man or woman can say with honesty that they have encountered it often in a whole lifetime. Was it their fault that they were physically made for each other, and by mischance happened to be brother and sister?

But when, that afternoon, Jean-Noël heard that the order for mobilization had been posted on the walls of the village, he received the news as a deliverance.

Perhaps the war would let both Marie-Ange and himself forget the only love for which they were made.

He had no doubt that he would be killed, for at the moment he desired it. He was determined to apply for some dangerous post, to play a losing game with death, not from patriotism, not even from a desire for redemption, but simply out of contempt for life. He felt as if he were dead before going into battle.

EPILOGUE

Epilogue

SIMON LACHAUME went to the open window, and leant his forehead against the frame. How often, how many thousands of times, since he had owned the flat, had he made this automatic gesture?

How many thousands of times had he looked out across this landscape of roofs, palaces and gardens that he now no longer saw from having looked at it too often?

But this evening the gardens, the palaces, the roofs and the great steel tower on whose summit the accustomed beacon was now extinct, had ceased to be obscure and had suddenly assumed a profound truth, an accusing reality.

A moonlit city, a dead capital, streets like shadowy corridors in which only the dimmed headlights of taxis shone like glow-worms, or perhaps the cigarette-lighter of some belated diner-out seeking his door-bell, and the glass of a street-lamp showing nothing but a pale reflection of the Milky Way. This was Paris's first night of blackout.

War had been declared a few hours earlier, "after tragic communications between the Governments in London and Paris," said the newspapers—as if there could be any doubt that it was a tragic thing to declare war.

"At least I'm lucky not to be a member of the Government at this moment," Simon thought.

But was this solitude, this sense of idleness, really lucky? Of course he had a mass of files to deal with, and all the problems that mobilization and requisitioning were going to create in his constituency. And tomorrow he would go to the Chamber and criticize the measures taken and ask questions about the equipment of the fortress troops and the maintenance of agricultural labour in the countryside, and he would vote for the supplementary estimates required for the massacre, and the whole Assembly would rise to its feet with a splendid display of national unanimity and they would perhaps sing the *Marseillaise* out of tune and with tears in their eyes. But was he necessary to all that? Couldn't anyone else do it in his place? Couldn't anyone have done all that he had done?

From the depths of the dark street a policeman whistled.

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"Hullo, up there, your light!" he cried. "Do you want a summons?"

"All right, all right, I'll close it straight away," Lachaume replied humbly.

Obviously the policeman did not know whom he was speaking to. But even if he had known, he would merely have stood to attention and said: "I beg your pardon, *Monsieur le Ministre*. But orders are orders and it's for the leaders to set an example."

And Simon would have replied: "But of course, my friend. You're quite right, you're doing your duty and I congratulate you." An absurd little comedy. The war would give all those who were not taking part in it an opportunity of becoming important in their little rôles, their little rôles of policeman or leader of a Parliamentary group.

Simon went and turned out the light; then switched on the lamp on his desk which, with its green shade, could not be seen from outside.

Marie-Ange's letter was on his blotter.

"I have torn up all your last letters. I ask you not to send me any more . . . My nerves are shattered. And they take longer to mend than bones."

Simon could not look at the letter, nor repeat its sentences, without tears coming to his eyes.

So Marie-Ange did not even know what the letters he had written to her contained, she had not even been willing to read the avowals, the transports, the supplications he had written her, nor the reproaches with which he overwhelmed himself. And the humiliation of writing to someone who did not answer had served no purpose.

"But there is no humiliation where one really loves," he thought. "And what am I doing now in the world, what am I doing on the earth?"

Since Marie-Ange had left him he had been unable to take any interest in, or indeed touch, any other woman. He did not want to. He wandered through the galleries of his empty love like a poor man in an unfurnished house. What face could move him except that of Marie-Ange, whose every expression he had learned to read, on which he had learned to decipher—oh, never well enough!—all the secret syntax of her smile, the quivering of her eyebrows, the questioning rise, and fall of her lids? What other body could bring him such peace by curling against his own in sleep?

"She loved me less than I loved her. But that's only natural, it's always the younger who has the advantage. The advantage in love always goes to the one who loves the least. Till I met her I had always had the advantage. And yet she seemed to be happy with me, because of me!"

That was what made him suffer so much, having no one to give happiness to, to have lost the only being to whom he had ever wished to give it.

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As he had grown older, a sort of nucleus of kindness had taken shape within him, without its being really a part of his nature, and this always constitutes a danger. And now his life had no direction; he felt as if he had nothing to live for.

He was ashamed of being so obsessed with his personal tragedy while the whole country was in the grip of great events, while a dark canopy had been drawn across the capital of the second greatest empire in the world; and while beneath that star-spangled canopy, the catafalque for a whole city, lay the unhappiness of fathers who had taken their sons to the station, of mothers who, even in the heart of summer, had insisted on putting a woollen scarf into their soldier's pack, the anguish of wives, of mistresses in beds so suddenly grown too wide, the despair of fiancées faced with the postponement of their dreams, the terror of pregnant women, of women in labour, the misery of frail humanity among these threatened, too-fragile walls.

But, had he not been devoured by his own sorrow, would he have been as sensitive, as receptive to the collective unhappiness, as capable of imagining the distress of unknown people?

"Marie-Ange is safe in the country. All in all it's just as well. If there are raids here she'll be in no danger. I ought to be glad to have no one I love to be afraid for," he thought. And a moment later he said to himself: "She'll probably come back. I shall see her again. War alters many things. Besides, she'll certainly want to ask me to do something for her brother."

There was a ring at the front door. He had dismissed his servants; he went and opened it himself with the absurd hope that it might be Marie-Ange, or perhaps a telegram from her.

"I've brought you your gas-mask, Monsieur le Ministre."

It was the concierge, appointed head of Civil Defence for the flats. His thick white hair stood out in the darkness.

"They were distributed this afternoon," he went on. "I said: 'I'll take Monsieur le Ministre's; he's so busy he'll certainly not think of it. We must protect Monsieur le Ministre! We haven't got too many men like him.' So I've brought it up, just in case those pigs start throwing gas-bombs at us tonight."

"Thank you very much, Monsieur Lecorne," said Simon, taking the grey cylindrical box.

"They don't make one any younger, do they, Monsieur le Ministre?" the concierge went on.

He wanted to talk, to be reassured probably.

"No, they make one no younger," Simon said. "Thank you again."

He closed the door and went back to his study.

"I ought to have said something to that good chap. No doubt his son has gone."

He put the grey cylinder on the table. He remembered having

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signed, when he was Minister for War, the order for the standardized production of these masks for the protection of the civilian population. He had been shown a model, chosen by the competent authorities among several suggested varieties.

"How does this one work?" he wondered.

He took the rubber mask with its metal snout out of the box, and put it on.

"No, they don't make one any younger," he thought. He had no need to go to the looking-glass to see himself as he had been twenty or twenty-two years ago, wearing an almost identical mask on his face. Behind the two glass eye-holes he saw the trenches again; he saw his captain; he saw his dead comrades; he saw the arm caught up in a telegraph pole by the tatters of its sleeve; he saw houses with only three sides, a wedding photograph hanging absurdly on the wall of the first floor; he saw disembowelled horses, their entrails dragging in the dust; he saw his section-leader's dug-out blown up—"Lachaume, you're in command now"—he saw whole forests turned into hillsides of blackened posts by exploding shells—shrapnel, high explosive, mortar-bombs—and now all that was about to begin again with explosives ten times more powerful, tanks ten times heavier and aircraft ten times faster.

"I feel as if I were suffocating in this," Lachaume thought pulling off the gas-mask.

And yet, he had worn a similar mask for long hours during gas-attacks. Was it the new mask that was wrong, or was it the breathless lungs, the hardening arteries of an elderly, sedentary, too-well-fed and prematurely ageing man?

He unscrewed the front of the snout, then screwed it up again, checked the elasticity of the rubber, wiped the glass of the eye-pieces, performing a strange autopsy on the face of the monster that he had thought to have abandoned for ever twenty years ago.

If the recently demobilized Lieutenant of Reserve Lachaume, who, on the 14th July 1919 stood under the trees on the Champs Elysées, jostled by the crowd, and applauded himself as he applauded the mounted Marshals, the troops marching with flags flying beneath the Arc de Triomphe, if the unknown little student who then shared the belief of his whole generation that he had fought for a lasting peace in "a war to end war," if that Lieutenant Lachaume had been able to materialize behind this mask, he would most certainly have hit the Minister Lachaume.

"For I haven't even the excuse," Simon thought, "of having been an ordinary, obscure citizen; I've been the head of a newspaper, I've had the press and the tribune at my disposal, I've been twelve times a Minister, I've had my hands on what is stupidly called the helm of power. Have I acted or spoken even once as I should have done, as I promised myself I would do? Have I even once tried to use that power

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for peace, for the peace of the world? Have I once raised my voice to say that peace is not the security of the ostrich for a legislative session, nor even the illusory prosperity of a nation, but that there was no peace for mankind if one man on earth were menaced, no prosperity on earth if one man were dying of hunger, no happiness on earth if one single man could not bring up his children?"

He thought of Abyssinia, of Manchuria, of Indian famines, of Spain, of Austria, of Czechoslovakia, of all that he had accepted, allowed to happen, confirmed, approved.

And he had to recognize that it was the very means he had used for the acquisition of power, and the men from whom he had received it, and with whom he had shared it, that had prevented his using it for the good of the world.

"Have we in our speeches, my friends and I, repeated often enough that if a new war broke out it would be the ruin of civilization? Well, it's here, it's happened. Lights have gone out tonight that will never be lit again. And this mask, this mask? Does it even work?"

Seized with a belated, ridiculous scruple, he crossed the flat, mask in hand, and went to the kitchen.

"If I could be certain of having at least signed one useful order, taken one measure that can protect human lives, I should be less disgusted with myself. Did I ask myself if bribes had been distributed or undue influence brought to bear in the selection of this model, in the choice of the factories to make it?"

He put the mask on again, made sure that the rubber was properly adjusted over his cheeks, turned on the taps of the gas stove and leaned over them. He waited two, three, four minutes.

"It would be very funny," he thought, "if the former Minister for War died while trying out his gas-mask. The last sign of a professional conscience."

But it was all right, the mask worked perfectly. There was no smell, it was completely gas-proof.

"Good God, I certainly suffocate in the thing though! I couldn't bear it for more than an hour. I should die of apoplexy. Not that it makes much difference whether it's that or something else."

He turned the taps off and removed the mask for the second time. The gas had spread through the room. He took a deep breath of it, of its sweet, poisonous odour, and instinctively ran to open the window. "Oh yes, I must be careful of the light," he switched the light off.

"Why did I open the window?" he wondered. "I had started well. I should have gone on. It's not as difficult as all that. What more have I got to hope for from life? I've had everything there is to have along the path I chose. It could only end here."

Here: that was to say on the wooden chair, in this dark kitchen between the saucepans, the enamelled stove, the brightly painted dresser

gleaming dimly in the darkness, and the window opening on iron chimneys and a corner of sky whence the bombers might come.

Here: that was to say, separated without hope from Marie-Ange, set aside from power, with war declared and the certainty of collapse for a society he had no desire to survive.

To die in front of these saucupans hanging from the wall, when he had been a worldly politician, who went to private views, masked balls, first nights. Saucupans. He saw his mother by the hearth at Mureaux. His mother whom he had never loved.

And after a moment he shrugged his shoulders. However despairing he felt, he knew that it would not be easy for him to decide to die. He was too old. He had passed the age for suicide.

He went back into his study; the journey through the empty flat acted like an evil spell upon his nerves. He went to the bookcase, placing a sort of hope in those volumes each of whose places on the shelves he knew. Works on political economy, autobiographies, diplomatic histories—what little profit he had drawn from them!—the poets, the poets who console, the poets whose function it is (they say it themselves) to suffer for others, the poets who had fed his youth, the great, the less great, the old fashioned: Verlaine, Sully Prudhomme, Jean de La Monnerie . . .

La Monnerie, Marie-Ange. Simon took down a volume of the old, dead master, who had died after the other war.

How lucky those men were, creating lyrical sorrows with which they could live, by which they could live, honoured, admired, till they were eighty! But no, no! Not even that for Simon. He had not even wished to be a god. He had wanted to arrive, succeed.

Like three adolescents out of four, he had dreamed of an exceptional destiny without being very sure that he had the gifts to achieve it.

But he knew that he was no exceptional man merely because he had achieved it.

He had lived enough to understand that there exists in society a certain number of pre-eminent positions which must be held, come what may, and that men who have powers of intellect, work, and physical stamina only a little superior to the average are directed towards them by an almost fated path.

For them success is barely more than a question of endurance, a matter of health. They have only to wait to replace the dead. Very great men are rare; it is merely the less mediocre who normally administer the affairs of the world.

"Yes, I succeeded, and there it is. The last state of men who have succeeded is perhaps even more tragic than that of those who have failed, for they haven't even the solace of believing that they have been the victims of injustice."

Tidy from habit, he replaced the book. And his eyes moved down

the shelf, but without hope. ~~Albert Samain~~, Henri de Régnier . . . And Simon remembered the latter's terrible phrase, two words in juxtaposition which alone were worth a whole library, two lucid, pitiless words, like an inscription found among the ruins:

Vivre avilit.

Nothing more terrible had been written, and nothing more true, to explain to the men of the future the men of this dying society.

"Living degrades . . . living degrades . . . What does it matter whether it be today or tomorrow, when one has understood that? And better today than tomorrow. And the planet will grow cold. And long before then France will have disappeared, as all countries must disappear. A dead language. A dead country. One must be either Homer or the heedless passer-by."

And without realizing that he was still holding the metal-and-rubber snout in his hand, he started towards the kitchen, his thoughts disorganized by inaction. He was going back to the gas-stove to play at his own death, because he had nothing else to do, and knowing well that he would not go through with it to the end.

The telephone rang.

"Perhaps it's Marie-Ange," he thought with a start. And he ran to the telephone.

"Monsieur Lachaume? Is that Monsieur Lachaume? Oh, Monsieur le Ministre, hold on, the Prime Minister wants to speak to you."

The voice of the official was replaced by that of the Prime Minister with whom Simon was familiar.

"Oh, is that you, my dear Lachaume ! I was afraid I mightn't get hold of you," said the Prime Minister.

And he explained to Simon what was happening. Three Ministers of military age had asked permission to join the army. "It's necessary, indeed, indispensable to the prestige of Parliament. They've got guts, it's admirable," the Prime Minister went on. It was also an opportunity, a necessary and indispensable opportunity of remodelling the Government, of setting up a Cabinet of National Union and Public Safety. The Prime Minister, after informing him of the precise proportions of the parties, offered Simon the Vice-Premiership without portfolio.

"Altogether your party represents on the electoral register a third of the mobilized classes," said the President.

"Ah, so he recognizes that, does he?" thought Simon.

"This is no moment for minor differences. I demand, indeed I insist," the other went on, "that you accept. Without portfolio, you understand, because I'd rather give them to less important men than yourself. But I intend to place several Ministries under your control; and certainly as far as public opinion's concerned . . ."

"I must ask you for an hour to think it over. I'll give you my answer in an hour's time," Simon said.

The mask was lying on the table in front of him.

His thoughts, which a moment before had been entangled in a black fog

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intrigues, the subordinates with one has to take on one's shoulders—and bargain."

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But just because he was being recalled to the Government he looked on the situation less tragically. It was one o'clock in the morning. There had been no bombing yet. Perhaps the Germans had not so large an Air Force after all... Organization was needed, and quickly; the nation's energies must be concentrated. Why should he look on this war as interminable? It might be rapid and victorious. Hitler was deeply engaged in Poland. He was weighed down with populations whom he had conquered in haste and who were necessarily hostile to him. Perhaps France would save the world; and men were needed to organize this salvation. Simon already had a fine speech, neatly phrased, rising to his lips. The measures taken for Civil Defence should reassure the civilian population...

And he already saw himself inspecting the trenches, walking quickly, like Clemenceau, like Poincaré... For if the Ministry should fall, then the next Prime Minister...

Was it the same man who, a few minutes earlier, had been amusing his loneliness with gas-taps?

And Marie-Ange? Resume power without knowing that Marie-Ange was waiting for him at night...

"But I shall see her again, Marie-Ange; the war will bring her back to me, it's bound to. It was only a moment of weakness just now, a moment of disgust. After all I am a man like others. I too have the right to have my moments of discouragement. And I am still stronger than the younger generation."

Simon Lachaume gazed at him, at the mask, at the books, at the vague reflection of his figure in the looking-glass, at the window open on the dark city, and he filled his lungs with the freshness of the night.

He lifted the telephone-receiver and dialled the number.

"Hullo," he said, "is that you, Prime Minister? I accept!"

Living degrades, of course; but for Simon Lachaume, as for the world he represented, it was still the only way to exist.

